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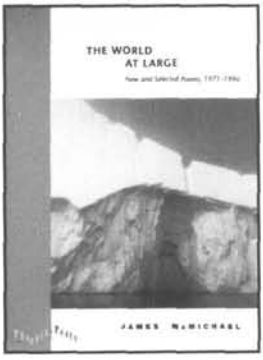

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A magazine of literature and the arts

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TO OUR READERS

New books edited by an Advisory Editor and a Contributing Editor respectively of THE HUDSON REVIEW have recently been published. In accordance with our policy, they will not be reviewed in these pages, but are listed below for the interest of our readers:

EMILY GROSHOLZ, ed.: *Telling the Barn Swallow: Poets on the Poetry of Maxine Kumin.* University Press of New England. $29.95.

BERT CARDULLO, co-trans. and ed.: *Bazin at Work: Major Essays and Reviews from the Forties and Fifties.* Routledge. $59.95; $17.95.

Publication of this issue of THE HUDSON REVIEW is supported by public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts, a State Agency. We wish to express our appreciation to this organization for its generosity.

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THE HUDSON REVIEW is published quarterly by The Hudson Review, Inc., 684 Park Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10021. It is indexed in the Social Sciences and Humanities Index and in the American Humanities Index. Book reviews are indexed in Book Review Index, and poems in Index of American Periodical Verse.

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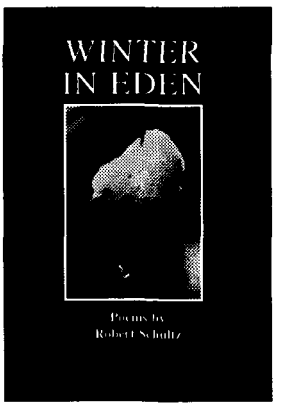

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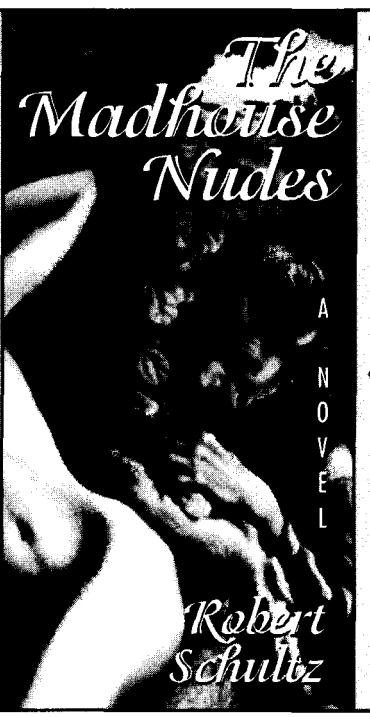

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Letter to the Editors

Dear Editors:

May I offer a few suggestions regarding Denis Donoghue's fine article "Eliot's 'Marina' and Closure" (Autumn 1996). He might want to consider them when he eventually includes this essay in a volume, as he certainly should.

Mr. Donoghue has settled on the idea that the voice in "Marina" is that of Shakespeare's Pericles, or, more likely, "Pericles" as refracted through the mind of the poet.

Yet there are so many other voices in the poem, none of them easily associated with Pericles, that I would urge Mr. Donoghue to consider that the voice in the poem probably is a composite Voyager, or Pilgrim at sea, and that, in fact, the coast being approached is identifiable as that of Massachusetts.

The seacoast described in the opening three lines of the poem has little to do with Pericles:

> What seas what shores what grey rocks and what islands
> What water lapping the bow
> And scent of pine and the woodthrush singing through the fog

We have been here before. Eliot's "minor" poem "Cape Ann" gives its location off the northeast coast of Massachusetts. Eliot always associates this coast with divine intimations, as in the sixth section of "Ash Wednesday":

> And the lost heart stiffens and rejoices
> In the lost lilac and the lost sea voices
> And the weak spirit quickens to rebel
> For the bent goldenrod and the lost sea smell

We return again in "The Dry Salvages," islands in the sea off Cape Ann. In that "sea" Quartet, too, we have the haunting line, "Fare forward, voyagers."

This specific and numinous coastline appears again as the poem "Marina" reaches toward the end of its own voyage:

> What seas what shores what granite islands toward my timbers
> And woodthrush calling through the fog
> My daughter.

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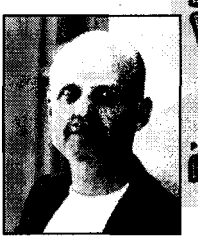

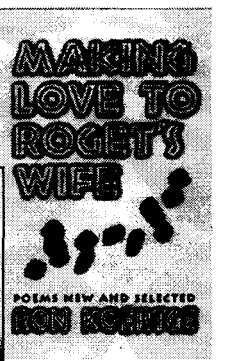

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This coastline is important in Eliot's poetry, not Shakespeare's, and of course important in his life. Lyndall Gordon, in *Eliot's New Life* (1988) is important and informative on biographical and other matters here. Thus, the famous passage about the "Bowsprit cracked with ice . . ." is drawn from Governor Bradford's account of the Pilgrim crossing written between 1630 and 1650: "[The] ship was shroudly shaken, and her upper works made very leakie; and one of the main beames in the middships was bowed and cracked, which put them in some fear that the shipe would not be able to performe the voyage . . . And as for the decks and upper workes they would calke them as well as they could . . . So they committed themselves to the will of God, and resolved to proseede."

Moving outside Eliot's poetry itself, it is undoubtedly pertinent that Eliot's ancestor Isaac Stearns emigrated to Salem, on this coast, in 1630; that in 1927 Eliot translated St. John Perse's *Anabase,* Section VI of which about a journey to the New World prefigures "Marina"; and that in 1930 he told William Stead that Massachusetts was his real ancestral habitat. (Lyndall Gordon, seriatim)

There are some biographical points, too, that may be pertinent. Eliot as a boy summered with his family on Cape Ann and had at least one numinous experience there gazing at a sea anemone in a rock pool. He liked to sail his small boat up the coast as far north as Casco Bay in Maine. Thus Eliot, too, was in this literally a voyager.

"Marina," then, is full of voyagers, the voice a synthesis of the living and dead (a "compound ghost") becoming the voice of the Voyager.

Then we have "O my daughter." Pericles is here, of course, but perhaps not only Pericles.

In 1930, when he completed this poem, Eliot was undertaking a transatlantic voyage and expected once again to see Emily Hale in New England. He had met her in Boston during his undergraduate days at Harvard. It is Emily Hale with whom he later walked in the numinous garden at Burnt Norton. There is reason to think that she is the woman in his poems as early as "La Figlia Che Piange," and charges with emotion his Lady of the later poems.

She was bewildered when he did not marry her after Vivienne's death; but, then, Dante did not marry Beatrice.

Their correspondence over the years was enormous. Eliot destroyed all of her letters. His letters to her, a very large number, are at Princeton and cannot be read until well into the next century. (Gordon Liddy, who led the Watergate break-in, is still alive. Guggenheim Foundation please take notice.)

The "daughter" in "Marina" to some degree may fuse with Emily Hale, who in 1930 was waiting for Eliot to arrive in New England.

Lyme, New Hampshire — Jeffrey Hart

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Denis Donoghue replies:

I am pleased to have Jeffrey Hart's characteristically helpful and generous reading of my essay. There is no war-to-the-death between us on "Marina." It is true that Eliot's sea-poems are mostly predicated on his early summers in Cape Ann. Jeffrey Hart correctly refers to passages in "Cape Ann," "Ash Wednesday," "The Dry Salvages" and a prose passage of notable point in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism.* The real issue between us is the choice between a reading of the poem as Pericles' imagined words throughout—regardless of the sources of Eliot's phrases—and a reading of it as the "voice" of a composite Voyager or Pilgrim. I prefer the first possibility, as I do, too, in another much-freighted poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." The "composite" reading seems to me more plausible and more telling in the "Four Quartets" and "Ash Wednesday." I've always preferred to read "The Waste Land" as a medley of voices; though I've been made to feel misgiving about doing so by reading Calvin Bedient's *He Do the Police in Different Voices,* which is a "single voice" reading.

GEORGE V. HIGGINS

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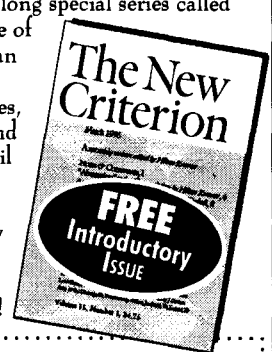

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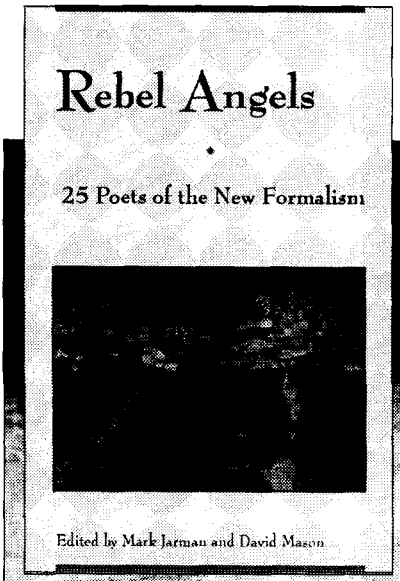

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THOMAS M. DISCH

The First Annual Performance Art Festival at the Slaughter Rock Battlefield

As they drove up along the Delaware, Professor Hatch would keep pointing out objects of interest, mostly having to do with nature. K.C. had no use for nature. He'd had more than enough of it growing up in West Virginia, and the nature here seemed pretty much the same as the nature there, except for the river, and the fact that things weren't as level here so the road had to keep switching directions as it wound around the hills. Otherwise, you saw the usual stuff—trees, tall weeds along the road, some big rocks behind the weeds. According to Professor Hatch there were no towns for miles, just a few scattered convenience stores and filling stations. All the rest was nature.

"Funding," said K.C., lighting another cigarillo from the butt of the last one, "that's been my big problem. I could be doing *incredible* things if I didn't have to be thinking about funding all of the fucking time!"

Professor Hatch nodded sympathetically. "I know," she said. "It's the same here. It's the same everywhere."

"For instance," K.C. went on. "With the blood. I don't use *real* blood in what I do. Human blood, I mean. I buy the blood I use from a slaughterhouse, and I keep it refrigerated. It's *safe*! But then I go to this nowhere museum in Omaha or somewhere like that and, just because Ron Athney was there a couple months earlier and someone got a little blood on them . . . I mean, hey! is that my fault? I told them Athney uses his own blood, I use *animal* blood. Do animals have AIDS? So, suddenly I'm not part of their festival, and they want the money back on my air ticket."

"I've had the same sort of thing happen to me," said Professor Hatch, swerving to avoid a road kill.

K.C. swiveled round to see what they'd missed. Raccoon. When

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he was in the driver's seat K.C. generally tried to connect with the road kill by way of putting his signature on the highway.

"I've had *worse*," Professor Hatch went on. "I've had the police put chains across the doors of a church to keep my dance troupe from going in."

"No shit," K.C. sympathized. "Blood?"

"No, just nudity. In nineteen-eighty-seven! I can tell you I was depressed for a long time after that. And Alison—she's the co-director of the Festival but at that time she was my dance partner—Alison was traumatized. This lawyer, some official, I don't know, was reading this legal nonsense, and then four policemen started *tearing down our posters*! There were photographers from the newspaper, Alison was in tears, and I myself was frantic. They were destroying my whole life! I will tell you—*that* is the meaning of censorship. When two women cannot dance inside a Unitarian church!"

K.C. tried to imagine Professor Hatch nude, but he couldn't even imagine her with a first name. She wasn't a Miss, or a Mrs., or even a Ms. And he knew better than to ask where she was a Professor, or what she was a Professor of. She liked to talk but she wasn't interested in answering questions, unless they were the kind to keep her moving smoothly along her own private highway.

"This Alison, was she much younger than you back then?"

He'd thought it was a neutral question, but the Professor gave him a dirty look. "She was as much younger than me then as she is now. She was not a minor, if that's what you mean."

"No problem. I just meant they will always use that as a pretext if they can. I know from personal experience: I discovered that I wanted to be a performance artist when I was sixteen, so you could say I was a prodigy. I was working with this group called Early Death. We were more of a rock group really. Anyhow they wouldn't let *us* perform in this club in North Carolina because I was underage."

"North Carolina: that's Jesse Helms, isn't it?"

"I guess so. The blood was a problem there, too. Anyhow, like you say, it's all censorship."

Professor Hatch piloted them through a green tunnel of scenery that veered away from the river to the right. The conversation had fired her up to cruising speed, where she could

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drive along without feeling she had to keep talking. There was an alert, birdish glint in her eye, and the cords in her neck were stretched tight in a way that K.C. associated with being wired to just the right degree.

He smoked, she drove, the road unrolled in front of them, and then the first sign appeared for Slaughter Rock Battlefield. "There it is!" Professor Hatch said, hitting the brakes. The van skidded past the historical plaque, but she reversed until they were right alongside it.

The plaque said:

SLAUGHTER ROCK BATTLEFIELD

> In this area on August 15, 1780, was fought one of the bloodiest battles of the Revolutionary War. Over 120 militiamen were ambushed and savagely slaughtered by a party of 27 Tories and 60 Iroquois Indians.

"You wouldn't think," said K.C., "that they'd want to advertise what happened—being beat by about half their own number of Indians."

"There's two ways to look at it," said Professor Hatch, as the van lurched off the shoulder and back onto the highway. "You can see it as our militia suffering a sorry defeat—or as the Iroquois enjoying a spectacular victory. The park ground has become very popular with Native Americans. They come from all over the state. But of course that doesn't make for a large overall annual attendance. I've picnicked there on summer weekends when *no one* visited the park all afternoon. As though it weren't *there*. When I made out the applications grant for the Festival, I pointed out that here was one of the finest recreational resources of Sullivan County going completely unused. They were spending thousands of dollars maintaining this hidden treasure, with its wonderful natural amphitheater that no one ever performed in. What a waste! But also, how typical. For there is practically *no* art in Sullivan County. Of course, for me, and a few friends, that's been a kind of blessing in disguise. You see, New York State's grants programs for the arts are organized county by county. So, if you live in Manhattan, forget it! You could be Judy Chicago herself and you wouldn't get a nickel."

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"Judy Chicago?" K.C. asked.

Professor Hatch smiled a Buddhalike smile. "Judy Chicago is the Pablo Picasso of the twentieth century."

K.C. knew he was being condescended to, but he didn't mind. The Slaughter Rock Performance Arts Festival was offering him an honorarium of $250 for his gig, plus bus fare. Plus, most importantly, a chance to be able to show what he could do as a solo artist instead of as part of Early Death. There were critics coming all the way from New York City to see the show—two busloads of them, according to Professor Hatch, who was the driving force behind the Festival. The woman definitely knew her way around the performance art world, so it made sense to suck up to her and listen to what she had to say like she was some kind of guru.

"Sorry," he said, "I didn't mean to interrupt. You were saying about how New York works things county by county."

"Yes. So, it stands to reason, doesn't it, that the counties with the fewest artists will offer the best opportunities? Over the years I've received grants as a choreographer in Allegheny County, and for my poetry in Oswego County. But it was opening the Slaughter Rock Gallery that's been the real godsend, since when you're an institution you can keep reapplying every year. Of course, I still have to do the outreach work, bringing the art to the local communities. There's no escaping that. And it makes sense: it's the people who are paying for our grants with their tax dollars, so it's only fair that there should be something we give back to the communities."

K.C. couldn't resist: "But I thought you said, when we was driving away from the bus station, that we were leaving civilization and that there weren't any real towns up this way."

"There are no towns—but there are communities. What do you think Sullivan County's biggest industry is?"

"I don't know. Timber?"

"It *used* to be tourism. But that was forty years ago. No, corrections is the big employer here."

"Corrections?"

"Actually, adult warehousing of all sorts. There is a federal prison, and three good-sized state prisons—the biggest of them just for teenagers. Plus all sorts and sizes of halfway houses and

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rehabs tucked away here and there. Including one you may have heard of—Utopia, Incorporated."

"No shit, that's *here*? One of the guys in Early Death got sent there. The last I heard he was still locked up. So what do you do at these places? You go inside the prisons and do your performances there?" In the nude, he was wondering.

"No, much better than that. We offer workshops. In dance. In quilting and poetry. In all the creative arts. It's been a marvelously successful program. There is a genuine *hunger* for the arts among those who have been denied their freedom."

"Believe it," K.C. agreed. "A hunger for *anything*. I know, I been there."

"You were? You didn't mention that on your application." There was something taunting and maternal in her tone of voice that K.C. could relate to.

"I served time in a state home," he said, "around when other kids would be serving their time in sixth or seventh grade. So those records are *sealed* under court orders. But you want to know what I *did*, right? The basic charge was arson and destruction of property."

"*Plus ça change*," the Professor said, possibly thinking he wouldn't know what she meant.

"You're right," he agreed. "*Plus c'est la même chose*. In terms of the performance art. Though I don't think that would serve as any kind of extenuating circumstance with the family court. For them torching a building is a crime, not an esthetic decision."

"That is the outlook," observed Professor Hatch primly, "of all but a very few. What thin partitions, as they say."

She'd stumped him with that one, as she had with her Judy Detroit, but he wasn't vain about asking to have things explained. How else do you get an education unless you suck up to people who know things you don't? "Okay," he said, "I give up. *What* thin partitions?"

"Dryden," she said. "His *Achitophel*: 'A fiery soul, which working out its way, / Fretted the pigmy body to decay.' Then, a few lines later: 'Great wits are sure to madness near allied, / And thin partitions do their bounds divide.' "

K.C.'s first reaction was to cop a resentment. He was sensitive to remarks about his height relative to anyone else's, and "pigmy body" had to be figured as a slap in the face. But this was not the

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moment to score one for the home team, so, filing away the slight for future reference, K.C. concentrated on his party manners. "I guess that's like saying genius is right next door to madness." And then, by way of putting a polish on the apple: "Thin partitions: I'll remember that."

Half a cigarillo later, and up a long series of switchbacks, they came to the gate of the Slaughter Rock Battlefield Memorial Park—a pair of four-foot-high pillars of unmortared fieldstone, each bearing an heraldic shield of painted plywood. On the right-hand shield a tomahawk, on the left a musket. Professor Hatch drummed her fingers on the steering wheel while an attendant uniformed in urban camo lowered the chain that barred access to the inner drive. As they passed through the gate, the guard saluted Professor Hatch, a real spit-and-polish heel-clicking salute, which she accepted as carelessly as any five-star general.

After a further steep climb, the road split in two. To the left was Parking, to the right Picnic Grounds. They hung right, passing through another pair of dwarf fieldstone pillars to draw up beside a large Winnebago parked in front of a row of portable toilets. The side of the Winnebago was lettered "Slaughter Rock Gallery — Preserving Sullivan County's Artistic Heritage." Beyond the toilets, scattered among high, thick-boled pines, were some dozen heavy-duty picnic tables and brick barbecues.

At one of the farther tables a small tribe of Mohawks was enjoying a lunch of Kentucky Fried Chicken and keg beer. The Indians waved at Professor Hatch, and she waved back.

"They're not the genuine article, of course," she said. "They're our re-enactors."

"I figured," said K.C.

"There was never any problem getting the young people to volunteer for the Festival once they heard that we'd be re-creating the events of Slaughter Rock. Of course everyone wanted to be on Thayendanegea's side, and not a militiaman."

"No surprise there. Who wouldn't rather dress up like it's Halloween—feathers and war paint and all that? And then, like you said, the Indians were the winners. That bunch over there sure started early."

"We should get started ourselves," said Professor Hatch, unlatching her seat belt and stepping out of the van. "Or at least I

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should. I'm going to have to leave you here with Alison, while I deal with some of the others. Meanwhile, if we could get your equipment unloaded. . . . "

Professor Hatch opened the rear of the van with a remote, and then stepping away from the van, out of K.C.'s hearing, started talking into a cellular phone.

K.C.'s first concern was for the trunk that Liberty and Justice had been traveling in the whole long way from Camden, New Jersey. They'd never traveled such a distance confined in such a small space, and K.C. had been worried that they might get baked or would suffocate from being stowed at the back end of the luggage compartment on the underside of the bus. He'd wanted to open the trunk back in New York City, when he was changing from Greyhound to Trailways, but there hadn't been time. And when he got out at the crossroad where Professor Hatch was waiting, there wasn't time again. She seemed the kind of person who's always in a hurry, plus she probably was a herpetophobe. Lots of times people will tell you how they think snakes are so cool, the ideal pets and all that, but then you introduce them to Liberty and Justice and they'll go into shock.

They were both dead. He could tell without touching them. Any other time they'd spent some hours in the trunk, being bumped around, they would be hyperactive as soon as the top came off their case. Like as not, one of them would be curled up in position to attack, or might even take a lunge at him, forgetting about the steel mesh or just not giving a fuck. Not this time. They were dead.

K.C. did not believe in stuffing his feelings. When he felt something he expressed it. Any very intense or sudden pain took the form of a scream that started as a low growling, then took a yodel-like two-octave leap into a "Fuck this shit!" of high-octane primal rage. Even in grade school his tantrums had been legendary, but two years of professional experience with Early Death had perfected his native ability, and K.C.'s scream of grief for his two dead rattlesnakes transfixed everyone in hearing distance. Professor Hatch froze. A fat woman, who turned out to be the Professor's dancing partner, Alison, bounded out the door of the Winnebago. The imitation Indians sprinted across the picnic area, zigzagging between the tables, alarmed and excited.

With an instinct for the grand manner, K.C. took up Liberty in

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one hand and Justice in the other and lifted them over his head and screamed a second, even more artful howl—not as loud but shriller and wonderfully drawn out, with a quaver in it that would stop anyone who heard it in his or her tracks, like a baby's utmost scream. People are hard-wired to respond to that particular sound the way sprinkler systems respond to a fire.

It was Alison who took charge. She was a large, bottom-heavy woman, each thigh the size of an average torso, and she used her weight as a badge of authority. She marched forward, thigh by thigh, and took hold of the limp bodies of the snakes. "No more of this nonsense," Alison told K.C. "Let go."

He let her take the snakes from him and then, grateful as a musician might be for a good segue, went limp himself. Down on his knees with a silent wince of pain as the gravel ground at his kneecaps, then a fetal curl forward so that he could hide his face in his cupped hands and wait for the tears, if any, to begin. He thought of his own naked corpse, with all his friends and family gathered round (a trick he'd learned taking acting lessons at the community college in South Jersey), feeling guilty and regretful. Sure enough, the thought of his own tragic waste, so young and so talented and so thin, released the tears. Not a flood exactly but enough so that when he lifted his head they were there to be seen by the ring of spectators—all wearing Mohawks and war paint and looking amazed.

"Hey, K.C.," said the most elaborately authentic of the Indians, "get a grip, man."

"Jethro? Death Row Jethro?"

Jethro opened his arms invitingly, and, after K.C. had got back on his feet, they performed a solemn male embrace, jeans apart, arms wrapped tight around each other's shoulders.

"It's been awhile," Jethro said, disengaging and taking a step backward, "since anybody called me *that.* Here I'm just John." But he grinned in a way that assured K.C. that that was just a lie he had to tell for the sake of Professor Hatch and all the other Indians. This was the familiar wolfish grin of the lyricist and lead singer of Early Death's only song to hit the charts, "Homicidal Maniac."

K.C. wiped away his genuine tears with the cuff of his shirt. "You look a whole lot healthier, man. Compared to two years ago."

"It's holistic," explained Jethro. "You can't deal with just the

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symptoms alone, like in Western medicine, you have to treat the whole man. Plus, I've been eating a lot of food."

Jethro stroked the area on his thin, jutting chin where his goat used to be. Without the beard and with his irregularly shaped cranium exposed by the Mohawk, Jethro's face seemed even more like a skull than when he'd been Early Death's lead guitar. The weight he'd put on hadn't altered his basic persona, he was still a living reminder that all men are mortal, some more than others.

"I'm sorry about the snakes," Jethro commiserated, laying thin, fluent fingers on K.C.'s shoulder. "But that doesn't mean you'll be left out of the show. Where there's a problem there's also a solution. Remember when we were in Winston-Salem and the amps got busted up by those rednecks? Wha'd we do? We used those car alarms for back-up and we had a big success. Right? Am I right?"

"Yeah," K.C. conceded sullenly. He didn't like surrendering the drama inherent in his grief for Liberty and Justice, which he probably could have milked for more sympathy, particularly from Professor Hatch and her buddy Alison, who were the impresarios. On the other hand, maybe it wouldn't be such a good idea to come across as too unstrung. Jethro's instincts were right, even if he did sound like he was whistling some limpdick tune by Oscar and Hammerstein: When you walk through deep shit, keep your bootstraps dry, and don't be afraid of the dorks.

In any case, K.C. had a short emotional attention span, and after a primal scream had given his insides a good reaming-out he was usually ready to move on to new feelings. Liberty and Justice were gone now, no changing that, and he'd expressed his grief in a suitable way. Walk on, walk on, like the song says. The whole idea of performance art, as K.C. had come to understand it as a mature artist, was to deliver a gut punch, then step back, go somewhere else where for a while you might seem to be boring, and then when they weren't expecting it, Wham, a kick to the groin. Shock treatment. That was how a good horror movie worked, or a stand-up comic. Make 'em laugh, make 'em barf, keep 'em guessing.

So after being formally introduced to Alison (who was the strict sort of feminist who didn't shake hands with men but just looked at the hand being offered and nodded her head) and to the other Iroquois from Utopia, Incorporated—Keno, Duster, Winthrop,

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Lou, and Marlene—K.C. settled down with his old pal for a session of lateral thinking. At first Jethro's inspirations were all in the direction of nudity, which was no surprise. Jethro had a big dick, and he'd always been the first to drop his pants at any Early Death concert. And it had worked, since it is a gross-out for everyone, and an inspiration for those who can identify, to see someone so cadaverous also so well-endowed.

K.C. had a hard time diverting Jethro to alternate veins of inspiration, but he persisted. "We got to think of something that will work with that flagpole. The snakes may be out of the act now, but I still got all these ropes and pulleys and the harness. They're a major investment, I can't just scrap them."

"Okay, okay. We're looking at a flagpole. We're looking at *you* being raised *up* the flagpole."

"Upside-down," K.C. reminded him.

"Right. Up the flagpole, upside-down. Plus, you're in handcuffs?"

"Yeah, but they're gimmicked. I can get them off when I need to."

"I got it!" said Jethro. "What's the most natural thing to send up a flagpole? A flag! We'll burn a fucking flag."

"You think?"

"I know."

"We tried that once at the end of our gig in Durham. It didn't go down so well there, if you remember. Freddy lost two teeth."

"But that was North Carolina, this is New York. We've got two buses of critics coming up from the City, and those dudes will have *no* problem with burning a flag. They're liberals up here, they get off on that kind of thing. It's like you'd be exercising your First Amendment, or the Second, whichever. And it would fit right in with the re-enactments. Better than the snakes would have, if you think about it. Here's a battle that the Indians *won*. This was their land before there was any flags or flagpoles, just fucking trees. And the Professor is very big on the Native American angle, so she'll dig the idea of setting the flag on fire, I can guarantee, besides which it'll give us Mohawks something to do besides scalping our victims. We got a whole lot of Mohawks in the show. Basically, everyone isn't doing guard duty at the gate is wearing war paint."

"Your whole rehab?" K.C. marveled.

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"All of them in the *show,*" Jethro qualified. "Some of them opted out. So they're back at Utopia or decorating the grounds here as fallen heroes. Anyhow, in terms of putting *you* in the line of fire, Old Glory is as good as snakes any time. I like that: the line of *fire?*"

"Yeah yeah, I get it."

"And while the flag is being raised to where you're up there hanging by your heels, we can have Duster play a tape of 'The Star-Spangled Banner.' The Hendrix version. Well?"

"Lemme think about it." K.C. took the last cigarillo from his pack and snapped a wooden match alight with his thumbnail. But instead of lighting the cigarillo he just stared at the quivering yellow flame as it crept up the matchstick toward his fingers. When the heat got too intense, he dropped the match.

"Okay," he said, having thought it over, "I think it'll work. Let's go talk to the Professor."

It was Freddy Beale, Early Death's drummer and resident psychic, who'd originally got K.C. involved with the Tarot. The first time Freddy had read the cards for K.C. he'd told him to pick a card from the deck to be his Significator, and K.C. had picked The Hanged Man. Freddy had objected to his choosing a card from the Major Arcana, but K.C. had never had any doubt in his mind that The Hanged Man had to be his Significator, because his first childhood memory was of his dad dangling him upside-down from a pedestrian bridge while the traffic whizzed by on the highway below. What he was being punished for K.C. couldn't remember, and later his dad would insist that nothing like that had ever happened, that K.C. was either remembering a dream or else making it up. But the physical details were as clear now as though he'd seen it happen on a wide screen with Dolby sound: the perspective lines coming to a V at the upside-down horizon, and the cars hurtling toward him and disappearing with a whoosh and then a semi, sounding its horn like a blast from the last trumpet. Most of all he remembered the way it felt—not at all scary, like his dad had probably intended, but thrilling, like a ferris wheel. Years later, outside St. Louis, riding the big ferris wheel overlooking the Mississippi, K.C. had tried to recapture that sensation by hanging from the safety bar by his knees, trapeze-style, but before he could start spacing out on the visuals,

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the operator of the ferris wheel had freaked and K.C.'s death-defying ride had wound up in the amusement park's security office, which is not an ideal environment when you're peaking on acid.

This now was the best that upside-down had ever been, thanks in part to the equipment, which was designed for a balanced distribution of weight and minimum chafing, but mostly on account of the view. The flagpole he'd been raised to the top of was thirty feet high and situated at almost the highest point of the amphitheater, with a view in one direction of the tiers of stone benches where the audience would be sitting, and in the other direction across the whole actual battlefield, which was enormous. "Field," however, was not exactly the right term for it, since what K.C. could see was a steep downward vista of trees and rocks and suicidal plummets. From where K.C. was slung in the suspension harness he could see across the leafy treetops to the actual Slaughter Rock the place was named for, which had been decorated by the re-enactors with various dead bodies—very realistically done up, at least from this distance—representing the Yankee militiamen the Iroquois had slaughtered. If he squinted, he could see one corpse that looked like it had been genuinely scalped. Professor Hatch's FX people deserved high points for that one.

Those old Iroquois had been into savagery, no doubt about it. According to Professor Hatch's friend, Alison, who was some kind of expert about the Revolutionary War and Native American torture techniques, the major casualties of the battle had all taken place right underneath that one long ledge of reddish-black rock. As the militiamen had been wounded in different other parts of the mountainside they'd been brought there for medical attention, and then, when everyone else who could had escaped, the Indians had found the field hospital and the 74 wounded men. And that was how the place had got its name of Slaughter Rock. As Alison had pointed out, history isn't always just a lot of names and dates.

Though K.C. was not one to pay much attention to nature and the weather and all such as that, he had to give credit where it was due, and this was shaping up into one beautiful day with big old clouds sailing by underfoot and a wind that kept swinging him round in unexpected ways. He started writing lyrics in his head, which was something he only did when he was in a special mental

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space. This one looked like it might be a haiku, though he didn't bother counting the syllables the way he would have had to do if he was a formalist-type poet.

Real is the crowd in the bleachers

his haiku began. Then, after one or two false steps, it continued

No less real the clouds
Sailing by my combat boots.

Strictly speaking, the first line wasn't true. There was no crowd in the bleachers at this point, just Jethro and a few other fake Iroquois who were doing Tai Chi exercises on the topmost stone ledges of the amphitheater, so that their half-naked bodies were silhouetted against blue sky and billowing clouds.

Freddy had tried to get K.C. interested in Tai Chi, but for some reason it hadn't clicked. Where was Freddy now? he wondered. The last he'd heard Freddy had been in a shelter for battered women in Biloxi, having finally got himself transsexualized and then married to exactly the wrong guy. Talk about karma. Anyhow, he, or she, was probably still alive, which was one better than Gordon, who'd played rhythm guitar for Early Death—and Russian roulette, once too often. Right on the stage of the 4-H Club Building at the Linnet County Fair. *Those* fans had sure got more than they'd bargained for. And now all those screams and excitement were just so much nostalgia like the snows of yesteryear.

At first it had seemed an amazing coincidence to bump into Jethro this far away from the scenes of their old crimes. But there are no coincidences in real life, there's only networking. Jethro had explained to K.C., while he was being fitted into the suspension harness, how it was all his doing, Jethro's, that K.C. had been contacted to be one of the major acts at the First Annual Performance Art Festival at the Slaughter Rock Battlefield. How Professor Hatch had been skeptical at first but finally caved in when Jethro had explained about K.C.'s act with Liberty and Justice. Never mind that the act had never in fact been performed before a paying audience: it *was* a great idea, even on paper, and Jethro had even been able to dig up a copy of the application to

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the National Endowment for the Arts that he'd helped K.C. write up just before he, Jethro, had been shipped off to Utopia, Incorporated. Professor Hatch had expressed a respectful admiration but it was her friend Alison, according to Jethro, who had gone bananas. "Darlene," she had said (that being the Professor's Christian name), "we have got to get this boy here. He sounds archetypal." Alison, according to Jethro, was the real decision-maker. Professor Hatch, for all her greater visibility (Alison tended to stay inside the Winnebago), was only following orders most of the time. According to Jethro.

So here K.C. was, by Fate's decree, and Alison's, hanging upside-down from the highest flagpole in Sullivan County in the State of New York, waiting for fame's lightning to strike. K.C. had always known that he was destined to be a celebrity artist on a par with Karen Finley or David Wojnarowicz, transgressing the boundaries, destroying old categories, bringing down the house. It was what his whole life had been pointing toward since even before the accident, so-called, with the kittens in the laundromat when he was only four years old. Back in France there was Rimbaud, and now there was K.C., and who could say for sure which of them would make a bigger dent on the human psyche in the long run? K.C. was bound for glory: he could feel it in the very fillings of his teeth.

A sudden gust of wind twisted K.C. around (his harness had a swivel bolt) so that he was, once again, facing toward Slaughter Rock—and there at long last, on the woodland path leading to the amphitheater, were the critics, off their buses and being herded along by Professor Hatch, who was identifiable even at this distance by her peculiar hairstyle, which looked like a large gray doughnut on top of her head. The critics had stopped to admire the re-enactors, who were brandishing their spears and tomahawks and executing and re-executing the wounded militiamen. The spectacle was given a muted, ballet-like solemnity by the way Alison had choreographed the scene to resemble the clockwork motions of elves in a department store window at Christmastime. Behind and to the sides of the cluster of critics were guards in urban camo, like the one who'd greeted Professor Hatch at the entrance to the park ground.

The wind shifted and K.C. swiveled round so that he could no longer see Slaughter Rock and the arriving critics. His right

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shoulder struck the flagpole, but he managed to twist his cranium out of harm's way. At just that moment his earphones staticked into life. "K.C., can you hear me? This is Alison."

"Hey, Alison, finally. We've got problems."

"K.C.? K.C., can you hear me? Oh dear. I can see you, with my binoculars, moving your lips. But the sound isn't coming through."

"Come on, don't *do* this to me. I know you can—"

"There's always some glitch, isn't there," Alison went on in a tone of imperturbable sweetness. "Well, we'll muddle through. The show is about to get on the road, and I don't think you could be any more nervous that I am at this point. The things we do for art!"

K.C.'s mike, in the shape of a miniature cobra, was positioned right to the side of his mouth. He did not believe that it wasn't working, but on the chance he *wasn't* being lied to he spoke into the mike with the exaggerated clarity that he'd had to use when he was taking classes to become a TV anchorman, as though his crisp pronunciation might magic away the technical problems. "Alison, we have a problem here. My good buddy Jethro has decided to play some kind of practical joke. These cuffs he's put on me are not the cuffs I supplied him with. There's no spring, and I cannot get my hands loose. Can you hear this?"

"You're trying to say something, aren't you? But it isn't getting through. The artist's eternal plight!"

"Fuck," said K.C. feelingly.

"I can *hear* Darlene perfectly—she's telling our visitors all about the events leading up to Slaughter Rock, from the perspective of the Iroquois *women*—and I can *see* you, but not vice versa. I would like to be able to fix your mike, but there isn't time now to lower you and do that and get you back up there again, and you do make such a startling first impression. I'm chattering, aren't I? I always get like this before the curtain goes up. Don't you? I call it The Moment. It's not exactly stage *fright*, more a feeling that something unique and terribly important is about to happen. As though—Wait a moment, I'm getting something from Darlene."

The earphones went dead for a while, and K.C. tried to do the same with his thoughts. He was beginning to intuit that something was not right. It wasn't just that Alison seemed flakey. The world is full of flakes, that is a given. But what K.C. was picking up

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was that the Festival was not the simple scam he'd been expecting, not just an opportunity to give the NEA-funded finger once again to the bourgeoisie, which is to say, to the people who have to pay for their tickets. The organizers of the Festival seemed to have a more ambitious agenda.

Why, for instance, was Jethro, on the top tier of the stone bleachers, firing imaginary bullets in K.C.'s direction from what looked like it might be a real rifle? Jethro would mime taking aim and then, mouthing a *Pow*! inaudible at this distance, he'd jerk the barrel upward. K.C. began to reappraise their relationship. Jethro was a fellow artist, true, and in an ideal world there should he honor among thieves. But Jethro might well be harboring a grudge toward K.C. with respect to how he'd been admitted in to Utopia, Incorporated, under a court-mandated order that allowed him to be detoxed in lieu of serving hard time. The last time K.C. had seen his old friend, on the night he'd freaked, Jethro had been exercising his right to bear arms, and his *Pow*!s then had had real bullets attached, which were aimed at real people, K.C. included. Sometimes cops are the only solution, but even otherwise rational felons tend to hold a grudge against those who pursue that solution.

A while back, Jethro as part of his ongoing recovery had E-mailed a note to K.C., apologizing for the bullet holes and offering amends, but what if that letter, so sincere and full of honest feeling, did not represent Jethro's final thinking on the matter? What if he was looking for a payback? And what if these new friends of his had agreed, for their own flakey reasons, to help him get even?

Alison came back on line. "It's me again," she said brightly, "and everything is all right, no need to worry. One of our guests was making problems. He wanted to go back to the bus. Which is not exactly possible at this point. But Darlene has things under control. It was the critic from the *Voice*, and we can't very well let *him* miss the show, can we? Good Lord! Especially since the *Times* never showed. Wouldn't you know. After all the promises! Critics!

"Do you know what our major expense has been for this whole event? Catering! I'm not kidding. Each of the buses had to have two cases of champagne. Et cetera. But if we hadn't laid out the money and chartered the buses and *groveled*, there wouldn't be anyone here but us chickens. For a New York critic even Brooklyn

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is terra incognita, and that has been the story of my life! But not any longer. Somebody has got to draw the line. This far, no farther, stop. Life isn't long enough. Literally."

Alison stopped talking but K.C. could still hear her wheezing breath over his earphones. She sounded like a car that had flooded its engine and couldn't get started.

While Alison was still stomping on the gas pedal, so to speak, the critics began to file into the amphitheater. One of the critics began to make a stink when the guards—who were now serving as ushers—insisted that she had to sit in the area reserved for the press, in the middle of the second and third tiers. She wanted to know why she couldn't sit up in the top tier, since there was no one else in the amphitheater. Unless you counted Jethro, who had finished with his imaginary target practice and settled down into lotus posture, eyes closed, chanting his mantra, which was *Hare Kali, Kali Hare*!

The sound of the argument was drowned out by the opening squawk of the amps and then Hendrix's "Star-Spangled Banner." A procession of local grade-schoolers appeared from out of nowhere, dressed up as little Pilgrim Fathers and Mothers, in cocked hats and bonnets, and trying to sing along with the National Anthem.

Hendrix was faded to allow Alison's much amplified whispery soprano to announce, "From the Benjamin Tusten Elementary School in Fort Tusten, New York, won't you please welcome The Thirteen Colonies."

The critics dutifully applauded as the thirteen children came to attention in front of them. There's nothing like having kids on stage for making an audience settle down and behave, unless it's dogs or horses. The critic who'd wanted to sit higher up had plunked down where she belonged and was paying a bemused, condescending attention to The Thirteen Colonies, who had marched up single file into the bleachers to surround the critics in a loose oval.

Alison began a dramatic reading of Robert Frost's "Mending Wall." "Something there is that doesn't love a wall," etc. As the poem was read, the guards erected, with astonishing rapidity, a real wall of spiraling razor-wire between the children and the critics. As the progress of the wall's construction passed one of the children, he or she would hold aloft a miniature version of Old

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Glory and announce which of the original thirteen colonies he or she represented. Only little Delaware muffed her line.

"Well, there they are, Darlene," said Alison, unamplified, over the earphones. "Our captive audience. Didn't I tell you?"

"You're right, they just sat there for it," said Professor Hatch. "Amazing."

"It's what they're trained to do, isn't it? No critic will admit to being fazed, or shocked, or disconcerted by anything they might be made to witness. Besides, with that ring of darling children around them, waving flags, and Robert Frost to boot. . . . "

"Which, I must say, you read very well, my dear."

"Thank you. It's a poem I've always loved. I do wish those children could have stayed on for the finale, though."

"Now, we've discussed all that before. *Some* entertainments really are not suitable for the young. In any case, our thirteen darling little colonies are back on their school bus, which must be somewhere along Route 97 by now. And believe me, *cara mia*, they will never forget this night. It will live with them forever."

"Forever is such a lovely word," Alison whispered. "Forever and a day!"

This was followed by a sound that K.C., if he'd heard it over the radio, would have interpreted as a kiss. Did they know he was listening? Would it have mattered?

"K.C., are you still there?" Alison asked, reading his mind. "Oh, I know—what choice do you *have*? But you musn't think I mean to tease you. I actually have a great deal of respect for your physical courage. That's something I lack entirely. Your friend Jethro says that you are like the boy in the fairy tale who simply could not feel fear, or even embarrassment. I'm just the opposite. Sometimes I simply can't bear to be *looked* at, even by Darlene. So you can imagine what a breakthrough it was for me, with two left feet and ten thumbs, to become a dancer. Every performance I felt I was about to commit suicide. Well, and here we are now, doing just that! So to speak.

"Have you ever had a major medical problem, K.C.? Are you, for instance, HIV-positive?"

K.C. shook his head no.

"No?" She must have been watching from inside the Winnebago, which stood like a dam across the path leading from the parking lot to the amphitheater. "Jethro didn't think you would

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be. He said you'd get a lobotomy sooner than have sex. The reason I ask is not that I have any anxiety against dealing with Persons with AIDS. It's because it's so hard to explain what I've been through to someone who's never been there. Have you ever heard of Crohn's disease? Not c-r-o-n-e, but C-r-o-h-n. It's what I've got. A medical condition not very well understood. The walls of the intestine thicken, and that can lead to fistulas and abscesses, and that can result in peritonitis. Which is fatal. There's no certain cure. A surgeon may remove one section of the bowel, and then it recurs somewhere else. So . . . What is one to do? That's what I've had to ask myself. Submit to surgery? That's like telling a woman that since she *must* be raped she might as well relax and enjoy it. I don't think that is a rational solution to the problem. In fact, I don't think rationality itself is a solution. Western medicine treats symptoms, so the essential problem, which is spiritual, remains unsolved. So what *is* the solution? Art! Think about it, K.C. Art."

There was some actual art happening, meanwhile, in the amphitheater, in the form of an old-fashioned square dance, the kind when the men wore little white wigs and the women had big dresses. Apparently, the Festival's budget didn't have room for anything but the most notional wigs and ball gowns, but imagination made up for the lack of funding. The "dancers"—two men and two women—were strapped into wheelchairs and they were being do-si-do-ed and allemanded at high speed by eight of the Iroquois, while, in combination with some jingly super-loud harpsichord music, Professor Hatch spelled out the significance of the event.

"Before the Europeans came to these shores," she boomed out over the amplified harpsichord, "there were no walls. No amber fields of chemically fertilized grain. The dances of the Native Americans were shamanic rituals that united the dancer and her goddess, not geometric diagrams designed to subdue and deform the bodies of women. For the Europeans who came here in their *Niña*s and *Pinta*s and *Mayflower*s this entire continent was one vast woman, whom they would bind with treaties and title deeds and claims of ownership—and then . . . rape!"

At this cue, the four wheelchairs were equipped with old-fashioned muskets that were supported on tripods connecting to the seats and armrests, so that each weapon would be aiming in

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the same basic direction as the chair on which it was mounted. The music changed from a square dance to a fife-and-drum version of "Yankee Doodle," and Professor Hatch read the verses of that song at a death-march tempo in her throatiest, most menacing tone of voice, deconstructively repeating some of the phrases, such as "keep it up" and "went to town." To this accompaniment the four miniature armored vehicles converged on the front row of the amphitheater, then tilted back so that the muskets were aimed directly at the critics enclosed within the circle of razor-wire.

K.C. had once attended a performance in Louisville of *The Cencis*, a tragedy by the great French schizophrenic Antonin Artaud. At the very beginning of the play, two actors dressed up as soldiers had emptied their bladders into a plastic bucket at the side of the stage. For the remaining four hours of the drama that bucket just sat there, but everyone knew what was going to happen with what was in that bucket before the play was over, just the way you know when you see a gun in Act One that it will be fired before the last curtain.

The difference between the bucket back in Louisville and the muskets here and now was that there was no four-hour wait. Not even four minutes. "Yankee Doodle" came to an end—Professor Hatch was screaming "And with the girls be handy! And with the girls be handy!"—and without anyone having to pull a trigger (they must have been detonated by remote control) the muskets discharged, and the critics went into a state of panic. The muskets had sprayed them with pellets of colored chalk, which, exploding on impact, had turned them into instant living bunting. That was how Indians of India celebrated the holiday of Diwali, as Professor Hatch was trying to explain, but K.C. seemed to be the only one there paying any attention to her text.

One of the women in the critics' enclosure, her clothes and hair red from the chalk, tried to tunnel under the ring of spiraling razor-wire. The wire could not get a purchase on the motorcycle jacket she was wearing, but it did snag into her hair and her blue jeans, despite of which she kept crawling forward with her face pressed against the ground until she'd managed to break free of the wire. Then she headed in the direction of the Winnebago and, presumably, the exit. No one set out in pursuit. The Iroquois stood beside the wheelchairs they'd been pushing,

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and the uniformed guards posted along the upper tier of seats remained where they were, as did the critics, who didn't have that much choice in the matter, after all. Everyone watched as the escaping critic rounded the Winnebago and ran out of sight. Only K.C., from his privileged point of view, saw what happened next, as Duster tackled her to the ground, and Jethro ran her through with a bayonet and then in true Native American style took off her scalp.

"If everyone would kindly return to his or her seat," said Professor Hatch in a schoolmarmish tone of voice, "the performance will continue."

The critics had not actually *left* their seats (with the one significant exception, whose body was being dragged to the parking lot by Duster), but they'd heard their colleague's screams of protest and of pain and taken them to heart. K.C. wondered if it had begun to dawn on them that they'd been cast as extras in a homemade horror movie. (He assumed that someone was putting all this on videotape.) For that matter, when had *he* copped to the fact? Not till he'd actually seen Jethro scalping the lady behind the Winnebago, really. And yet there was that other scalpee laid out beside Slaughter Rock, which it now seemed safe to assume was not the work of set decorators but a genuine dead body. Whose? Probably someone connected with Utopia, Incorporated—one of the counselors so-called. There was enough free-floating ill will at any rehab to provide the psychic energy necessary for systematic mayhem. Rehabs aren't that much different from prisons, except for the way in a rehab they try and make you say how much you love Big Brother.

"We'll be raising the flag shortly," Alison confided to K.C. over the earphones, "but before we do, I wanted you to know how pleased I am that you've been able to be part of the Festival, K.C. In just a short time you've become very special to me. You have the gift of basic trust, as I do. I've always known that Someone or Something is looking after me. Some call it a Higher Power. Others believe in angels. Darlene has been both to me, especially since the diagnosis. *She* was always the one, before that, who had such crushing depressions. She was the one that had to be rushed to the emergency ward to have her stomach pumped. And my role was the pillar of strength. I'd tell her, 'Darlene, your day will come. Your work *will* be recognized. You mustn't give up now, on

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the brink of success. Don't turn your anger inwards: *use* it!' Oh dear, our time is so limited, and there's so much to express, to explain, to celebrate! But Jethro and Duster are giving me signals. It's that time."

"The Star-Spangled Banner" kicked in at once, but at a very low volume, as though you were a teenager again listening to forbidden music in your bedroom late at night. Jethro and Duster emerged from behind the Winnebago with a flag the size of a bedsheet. As Jethro and K.C. had mapped it out, the flag had been stiffened at both ends by bamboo rods so that it wouldn't flap around as it was hoisted up the flagpole by the pulley system knotted into K.C.'s braided ponytail. At the base of the pole, they sprayed the flag with gasoline syphoned from the Winnebago's tank, and then, once it had been raised to where the whole length of the flag was lofted up and on display, Jethro flicked his Bic and Duster started hauling on the cord of the pulley.

K.C. knew he was in a desperate situation, but he had had time to think about how best to employ his limited resources. With his hands securely cuffed behind his back (and he had scraped his wrists down to the basic hamburger putting that "securely" to the test), there was no way he would be able to get to the knife inside his belt buckle for some quick assistance. Which ruled out his being able to cut through the pulley's cord or the hank of hair that held it in place. An alternative remained—sit-ups.

K.C. had always wanted washboard abs, and he never finished up any workout without fifty sit-ups on a steep incline. Not full inversion sit-ups, but the principle was the same. He had time for one good try. He turned his head sideways and tightened his gut muscles so his body bent pretzel-wise.

God helped: the double cord of the pulley was hanging down across the front of his ear. With a further twist of his head, he was able to clamp his teeth on both cords, at which point he slowly eased back from his sit-up so that he was hanging back in his original Tarot-inspired position. Directly underneath him, Duster was tugging at the cord of the pulley, each tug a little more vigorous and threatening to the integrity of K.C.'s molars. The burning flag had reached its full First Amendment glory, and K.C. could feel the heat and smell the reek of gasoline.

Duster, who was obviously the kind of person with a low threshold of frustration, gave one final furious jerk to the cord,

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cracking one of K.C.'s molars but at the same time bringing the burning flag down on himself in a billowing bright extravaganza that could not have been more dramatically satisfying if it had been planned, though K.C. doubted that any of the assembled critics were making such reckonings at this point, for they were being squirted with some flammable fluid by the uniformed guards, who had gathered round the critics at full battalion strength.

"K.C., that was *sensational*! We haven't that much time left to talk, but if you *do* survive, Darlene and I have made tapes that explain everything. The rejections we've encountered as artists over the years. The critical sneers. The assessments of peer panels who never came to a single performance. Basically, it's so simple. I don't understand why no one has thought to do it before. If one is ready to take a big enough risk, and to make real sacrifices, finally, the Establishment can't stop an artist from achieving immortality. Jethro understood that from the first, and so did Darlene in her way. Well, I'm getting signals again. It's closing time."

The charges buried beneath the benches of the critics' enclosure were detonated first, and the critics, guards, the wheelchair square-dancing team, and all superfluous Mohawks were united in a single, kerosene-laced sphere of flame that dissolved all differences between actors and audience, text and context.

The Winnebago went next in a blast would not have looked meager even in a *Die Hard* sequel.

So was K.C. alone left to tell the tale? In which case what was he looking at in terms of fees from the tabloids, appearances on talk shows, book royalties, and, why not, a TV docudrama? Maybe he might even get to play himself! But no, he had to be realistic. He was too short for a leading role. His best hope was to share credit on the script. Even so, the whole basket of unhatched eggs had to amount to more than a million.

Perhaps it was unseemly to be focused on his performing career at such a moment, with the other victims of the tragedy dismembered by the explosion and still in flames all about the amphitheater, but K.C. had never had strong feelings about other people than himself. In that, according to many of the authorities on the subject, he was not unlike other major artists past and present from Andy Warhol to William Burroughs.

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His basket of eggs was not yet out of jeopardy, however, not while Jethro was still alive and, potentially, kicking. The electric motor that powered the winch that had lifted K.C. to the top of the flagpole began to whir, and K.C. found himself descending, a little too quickly for comfort, toward ground level. But a concussion was not what Jethro had in mind, for he braked K.C.'s descent some three feet above the flagstones. K.C. found himself staring into Jethro's beaded loincloth and thinking he was about to be the victim of the most elaborate rape in human history. But that wasn't what Jethro had in mind either, for he started the motor again and raised Jethro up another three feet so that they were eye to eye.

When someone is crazy, or very spaced, the best way to deal with him, according to all the police shows that K.C. had seen on TV, is to pretend he is rational. So that's what he tried to do. "So, what are your plans now, Jethro? I suppose you'll escape through the woods, just like the guys who survived the original battle here."

"I hadn't made any plans actually."

"Oh, come on. You expect me to believe this was all improvisation?"

"I mean, no plans for afterwards. I was supposed to be in the Winnebago with Alison and the Professor. There weren't going to be any survivors. It was going to be like Jim Jones down in South America."

"Well, maybe Fate's decided we're supposed to be survivors. It wouldn't be the first time."

"Fate, huh," said Jethro.

There is something about having an upside-down conversation that is very disconcerting. The other person's eyes are where the mouth should be and they blink in the wrong direction, while the motions that the face makes as it speaks—the lips exposing and concealing the teeth, the glimpses of tongue, the lifting and lowering of the jaw—begin to have the hyper-fleshy look of a Geiger alien. Add a Mohawk and war paint and features as naturally Geiger-like as Jethro's and the total effect can induce a first-rate sense of alienation or, as they say in the theater, *Entfremdungseffekt.*

"You shouldn't push your luck, Jethro. Even if there aren't any next-door neighbors that close by, there's bound to be some kind

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of official reaction to those explosions. I wouldn't linger backstage."

"So I should go hide in the woods? Live on berries and mushrooms?"

"If they think you died in the Winnebago, they won't start a manhunt."

"And why would they think that?"

"Cause I could say I saw you go in there right before it blew up."

"And why would you say that?" Upside-down and with the war paint it was hard to know if the expression on Jethro's face was a sneer or a frown of indecision.

"Cause it makes a better story. When it's made for TV. At the end of a story like this you want all the bad guys dead."

"So I'm one of the bad guys, am I?"

The look on Jethro's inverted face was definitely a sneer, and K.C. began to see light at the end of the tunnel.

"You've always been one of the bad guys," K.C. assured him. "One of the worst."

Jethro nodded. "I could take one of the buses the critics came in."

"No," said K.C. "If you do that, they'll know there's someone to look for. What you've got to do is wash that stuff off your face and change into some regular clothes and toss what you're wearing now into the Winnebago while's it's still blazing. Then disappear."

"And leave you to be a witness?"

"Right. But hoist me back up to the top, so I'm hanging up there when the cops get here. It shouldn't be much of a wait."

"I *could* just use your head for a football."

"You could, but if you do that, know what the result will be? When they make the movie about all this, it'll be Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis who are the stars. Whereas, if it's based on *my* version of events, it'll be a movie featuring Death Row Jethro—the first genuine mass murderer ever to be funded by the N.E.A. Is that reason enough?"

Jethro nodded. The basket of eggs was saved.

Later, hanging from the top of the flagpole, enjoying the scents of the night breeze, K.C. continued casting the movie in his imagination.

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DANIEL MENDELSOHN

New Translations from Cavafy

In memoriam Photis Anagnostou (1970–1996)

Desires

Like the beautiful bodies of those who never aged,
shut away inside a splendid tomb by tearful mourners
with roses at their head and jasmine at their feet—
that's what desires look like when they've passed away
without being fulfilled, before they could be made complete
by just one of pleasure's nights, or one of its radiant mornings.

Manuil Komninos

The emperor Lord Manuil Komninos
one melancholy September morning
sensed that death was near. The court astrologers
(those who were paid) babbled
that he still had many years to live.
But while they went on talking, the king
recalled neglected habits of piety,
and from the monastery cells he ordered
ecclesiastical vestments to be brought,
and he put them on, and was delighted to see
that he'd achieved the modest look of a priest or monk.

Happy are all who believe,
and who, like the emperor Lord Manuil, end their days
outfitted most decorously in their faith.

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He Asked about the Quality—

From within the office where he'd been taken on
to fill an insignificant, ill-paid position
(eight pounds a month at best: bonus included)
he emerged—as soon as he'd finished the solitary task
at which he'd been stooped the entire afternoon.
He came outside at seven, and then strolled slowly along,
dawdling in the street. A handsome boy;
arresting, even: a look that showed he'd realized
a plentiful yield from his senses.
He'd just turned twenty-nine, the month before.

He idled down the road, and down the shabby
side-streets that led to where he lived.

As he passed before a little store
where the goods on sale were
shoddy, low-priced things for laborers,
he saw a face within, he saw a shape;
they urged him on and he went in, as if keen
on seeing colored handkerchiefs.

He stood there asking about the quality of the handkerchiefs,
and what they cost; with a voice clenched,
nearly quenched by desire.
So, too, the answers that came back:
distracted, in a voice kept low.
And just beneath the surface, consent.

Occasionally they'd say a word about the merchandise—but
this was their sole aim: for their hands to touch
atop the handkerchiefs; for their faces to
draw near, and their lips, as if by chance.
Some momentary contact of their limbs.

Quickly, secretly—so the owner of the store
wouldn't notice anything, sitting there in back.

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Since Nine—

Half past midnight now. The time has quickly passed
since nine o'clock when I first turned up the lamp
and sat down here. I've been sitting without reading,
without speaking. With whom am I supposed to speak,
so utterly alone within this house?

The apparition of my youthful body,
since nine o'clock when I first turned up the lamp,
has come and found me and reminded me
of shuttered perfumed rooms
and of pleasure past—what reckless wantonness!
And it also brought before my eyes
streets made unrecognizable by time,
bustling shops whose movement has been stilled,
and theaters and coffeehouses that existed long ago.

The apparition of my youthful body
came and also brought me cause for pain:
deaths in the family, separations,
the feelings of my loved ones, the feelings
of those long dead which I so little valued.

Half past midnight now. How the time has passed.
Half past midnight now. How the years have passed.

Prayer

The sea took into her depths a sailor's life.—
His mother, unaware, goes and lights

a taper before the image of Our Lady
so that the weather might be fair, and his return speedy—

all the while she strains her ears
at the wind. But as she prays the icon hears,

solemn and full of mourning,
knowing that the son she awaits won't be returning.

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Days of 1908

That year he found himself without a job;
and so he made a living off of cards,
backgammon, and what he borrowed.

A job, at three pounds a month in a little stationery
store, had been offered to him.
But he turned it down without the slightest hesitation.
It wouldn't do. It wasn't a wage
for him, a young man with some education, twenty-five years of
age.

Two or three shillings a day was what he'd get, sometimes not.
What could the boy possibly earn from cards and backgammon
in the coffee-houses of his class, the common ones,
however cleverly he played, however stupid the partners he
chose?
And loans—then there were the loans.
It was rare that he'd manage a crown, more often it was half;
occasionally he'd settle for shillings.

Sometimes there'd be a week, occasionally more,
when he was spared the horror of staying up till dawn,
and cooled off at the baths, with a swim at morning.

His clothes were in a dreadful state.
There was one suit that he'd always wear,
a very faded cinnamon-colored suit.

Oh days of the summer of nineteen-hundred eight,
your vision, exquisitely, was spared
the view of that faded cinnamon suit.

Your vision preserved him
as he was when he undressed, when he flung off
the unworthy clothes, and the mended underwear.
And he'd be left completely nude; flawlessly beautiful; a marvel.
His hair uncombed, springing back;
his limbs slightly colored by the sun
from his being naked in the morning at the baths, and at the
seashore.

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Voices

The ideal, cherished voices
of those who died, or of those who
for us are vanished like the dead.

Sometimes in our dreams they speak;
sometimes in the act of thought the mind will hear them.

And with their sound for a moment there return
the sounds from the first poetry of our life—
like music, at nighttime, far away, that's dying.

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SUSAN BALÉE

Southern Classics

Measure me by myself
And not by time or love or space
Or beauty. Give me this last grace:
That I may be on my low stone
A gage unto myself alone.
I would not have these old faiths fall
To prove that I was nothing at all.
—Laura Riding, "Dimensions,"
first published in *The Fugitive*

The South has been measured—and found wanting—by people who stand outside of it geographically, historically, and spiritually. Politically correct historians and literary critics have reduced the South to a simplistic clash between white oppressors and black victims. No one in recent decades has wanted to explore further the ambiguities and complexities of the *real* South; instead, it has been far easier to demonize and dismiss a reductive South created by twentieth-century critics.

Few indeed are those scholars who will entertain in writing a few salient facts: eight of our first twelve presidents were masters of plantations (and our Constitution might not have been written nor our country founded without the leisure time afforded these founding fathers by the plantation system); the majority of the men who fought for the South in the Civil War owned *no* slaves and many deemed the slave system a great evil (count in this number Stonewall Jackson and John S. Mosby); finally, and this is the claim that black-and-white minded "liberals" really cannot contemplate: there were actually slaves who loved and respected their masters! Proof of this has recently come to my attention thanks to a graduate student in my summer Southern Fiction class at Beaver College. This enterprising student found in the Newark Public Library sheafs and sheafs of unpublished oral histories taken from former slaves during the Works Projects Administration—Franklin Delano Roosevelt's clever device for employing the dispossessed workers of the Depression.

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A typical account is that of Mrs. Marriah Hines, a former slave from Norfolk, Virginia.

> I lived with good people, my white folks treated us good . . . Why, master would buy cloth by the loads and heaps, shoes by the big box full; den he'd call us to the house and give each on'us our share. Plenty to keep us comfortable . . . We had plenty time to ourselves. Most of the time we spent singing and praying 'cause master was sich a good Christian and most of us had 'fessed religion . . . We ain't had no colored overseers to whip us nor no white ones . . . Every body was just plum crazy about master.

I don't think that Henry Louis Gates, Jr., or Houston Baker is likely to want to publish such accounts in their histories of black Americans, but such accounts do exist. In the dozen or so oral histories that my student brought to class, about half of them sounded like Mrs. Hines's. The other half followed the pattern we expect to see in slave narratives: cruel injustice, brutal masters, and so forth. But I do not need to detail that, for it is only too well detailed in contemporary criticism. It is these other voices that have been marginalized: the voices of the Old South, white and black, the voices of those Fugitive Poets and Agrarians who took their stand in 1930 to bemoan the passing of a way of life. *Not* the passing of the plantation system per se, not the passing of slavery—an evil acknowledged by almost all—but the passing of a communal society based on family and farm and shared responsibilities; the end of a society that prized its honor, its hospitality, its heroes, and its virgin lands. But a veil of shame has been cast over this section of America: The South's noble deeds, its great men and women, its classic literature have all alike been shrouded in dishonor.

Until now. As the tide turns on politically correct "theory," this false veil will, one hopes, be rent from the memory of the South. Indeed, even as I write this, some of the best-known political critics are recanting their views. The September/October 1996 issue of *Lingua Franca* contains Frank Lentricchia's jaw-dropping "Last Will and Testament of an Ex-Literary Critic." In it he maligns the kind of monolithic Marxist thinking that led a student in one of his classes at Duke to begin a discussion of William Faulkner with this remark: "The first thing we have to understand is that Faulkner is a racist." Lentricchia felt non-

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plussed and subverted; his own ideas were coming back to haunt him with all the subtlety of graffiti spray-painted above a urinal. An apostate to theory who has suddenly seen—or returned to—a different light, Lentricchia goes on to lament the current silliness of his own profession.

> I believe that what is now called literary criticism is a form of Xeroxing. Tell me your theory and I'll tell you in advance what you'll say about any work of literature, particularly those you haven't read. Texts are not read; they are preread. All of literature is x and nothing but x, and literary study is the naming (exposure) of x. For x, read imperialism, sexism, homophobia, and so on. . . . The point of naming it? Presumably to produce a contagion of true understanding (the critic as social interventionist), from which would follow appropriate social change in wholesome directions. . . .

But Lentricchia confesses to a secret life as an *amateur* reader, in the classic sense of that word: he is a lover of books, of literature. He reads because words give him pleasure, because texts are a mystery that he can never completely uncover but to which he is drawn, because great literature cannot be reduced to a political category and put in a box: it can only be felt, and only imperfectly understood. It can be *appreciated.*

Appreciation was also John S. Sanders' motive in bringing back twenty-two Southern classics from the oblivion of a besmirched history. His press, based in Nashville, Tennessee, has restored to print some of the most important works of the Southern Renascence—novels by Robert Penn Warren, Caroline Gordon, and Stark Young—and valuable biographies by Allen Tate, Andrew Lytle, and others.[1] Sanders has also reprinted a very fine firsthand

[1] The Southern Classics Series, published by J.S. Sanders & Company, includes the following: ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN SIMON SUGGS, by *Johnson Jones Hooper.* $10.95p. BEDFORD FORREST & HIS CRITTER COMPANY, by *Andrew Lytle.* $12.95p. THE FUGITIVE POETS, ed. by *William Pratt.* $10.95p. GEORGIA SCENES, by *Augustus Baldwin Longstreet.* $10.95p. THE GREAT MEADOW, by *Elizabeth Madox Roberts.* $10.95p. GREEN CENTURIES, by *Caroline Gordon.* $10.95p. THE INNOCENT, by *Madison Jones.* $11.95p. IN OLE VIRGINIA, by *Thomas Nelson Page.* $8.95p. JOHN BROWN, by *Robert Penn Warren.* $11.95p. LADY BALTIMORE, by *Owen Wister.* $10.95p. MOSBY'S MEMOIRS, by *John S. Mosby.* $11.95p. NIGHT RIDER, by *Robert Penn Warren.* $11.95p. NONE SHALL LOOK BACK, by *Caroline Gordon.* $10.95p. PENHALLY, by *Caroline Gordon.* $10.95p. SO RED THE ROSE, by *Stark Young.* $11.95p. STONEWALL JACKSON, by *Allen Tate.* $11.95p. THE TENNESSEE, VOLUME ONE, by *Donald Davidson.* $10.95p. THE TENNESSEE, VOLUME TWO, by *Donald Davidson.* $10.95p. A WAKE FOR THE LIVING, by *Andrew Lytle.* $10.95p. THE WOMEN ON THE PORCH, by *Caroline Gordon.* $10.95p.

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account of the Civil War, *Mosby's Memoirs*, by John S. Mosby, and a wonderful collection of diaries by Southern women who lived through the sectional conflict (*The War the Women Lived*, edited by Walter Sullivan). He has reprinted the poetry of the Fugitives—as integral to the history of verse in this country as their contemporaries, the Imagists, were in post-World War I England—and he has revived two of the most important works of the Southwestern humorists.

Indeed, this last accomplishment significantly deepens the contemporary student's knowledge of nineteenth-century frontier humor—whose apogee is Mark Twain, but whose antecedents in Georgia and Alabama are equally important. Until J.S. Sanders reprinted *Georgia Scenes* by Augustus Baldwin Longstreet and *The Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs* by Johnson Jones Hooper, none but scholars really understood that the Old South had two completely different mentalities: the plantation *and* the frontier. Professors of nineteenth-century American literature would be well-advised to start teaching these books in their classes, to remind students that there was a time when central Georgia was not "the East" but the Western frontier!

These books also make us see the importance of the Revolutionary War to the nineteenth-century Southern mindset. Southerners referred to it constantly during the second big war in their history, identifying during the Civil War with their Revolutionary ancestors—they felt they were fighting a similar oppression of and infringement on their basic rights and beliefs. Augustus Baldwin Longstreet takes us back to the early nineteenth-century South where he depicts, as he tells the reader in the preface, "*real* incidents and characters." Perhaps Longstreet had a foreshadowing of what might happen to the history of his region, for he prefaced his book with an eye to the future:

> The following sketches were written rather in the hope that chance would bring them to light when time would give them an interest, than in the belief that they would afford any interest to the readers of the present day. I knew, however, that the chance of their surviving

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Not in the Southern Classics Series, but also published by J.S. Sanders & Co. and referred to extensively in this review, is THE WAR THE WOMEN LIVED: Female Voices from the Confederate South, ed. by *Walter Sullivan.* $24.95.

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> the author would be increased in proportion to their popularity upon their first appearance; and, therefore, I used some little art in order to recommend them to the readers of my own times.

Longstreet is as adept as Jane Austen at commenting on the manners and mores of his time. But he does it from a male sensibility; both narrators, who alternate the telling of *Georgia Scenes*, are men. Their exchange on the female fashions of the day is amusing insofar as they go Austen one better and attempt to analyze the effect of women's low-bodiced dresses on male viewers. One narrator, Hall, believes that a woman who has knelt before the assembled company must not know that her male companions can see down her dress, but Baldwin corrects him: ". . . this was the very point of view in which an exposed neck must always be seen, while men continue taller than women; and that, as the young lady must have been apprized of this, she would hardly take so much trouble for nothing." The young gentlemen, it might be added, are "thrown into transports."

The narrators give both an American perspective on Europe, and their own perspective on their young Republic. Baldwin provides an amusing commentary on the imported Romantic music—particularly opera—that has found its singers on the American frontier:

> If the instrumental music of France and Italy be bad, their vocal music is, if possible, a thousand times worse. Neither the English *nor the Georgia language* furnishes me with a term expressive of the horrors of a French or Italian song, as it is agonized forth by one of their professed singers. The law should make it justifiable homicide in any man to kill an Italian in the very act of inflicting an *il penseroso* upon a refined American ear.

Lyman Hall, the more manly and less fussy narrator, depicts several of America's favorite pastimes: horse swapping, very bloody fistfights (where participants lose ears, fingers, and other body parts), and gander pulling: one of the strangest activities this reader has ever heard of, and yet apparently a common "sport" on the American frontier. The sport—if a late-twentieth-century reader can call it that—consists of taking one live gander, tying his feet together, greasing his neck from breast to beak, then hanging him upside-down from a rope tied across a road down which the gander "pullers" gallop on horseback and attempt to

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yank the unlucky bird's head off. Whoever succeeds wins the contest and the prize money. As for the poor gander, he "withstood many a strong pulling before his wailings ceased."

Other sports, more familiar to readers of nineteenth-century English novels, may also be found in *Georgia Scenes*; characters take a lively interest in horse races, fox hunts, shooting matches, political rallies, public debates, and dancing, which "was really, in those days, a merry-making business." Interest in the Revolutionary War and its heroes remained keen in the early nineteenth-century South and a simple invoking of the name of Washington inspired all who heard it. Nevertheless, Longstreet shows how woefully out of the habit of fighting the soldiers have become after a decade-plus of peacetime. An amusing sketch titled "The Militia Company Drill" shows what peace and prosperity have done to the Georgia soldiery. Instructed to appear at 9:00 A.M. with gun, bayonet, belt, and a pouch with at least twenty-four cartridges of powder and ball, the former soldiers straggle in at their leisure and without most of their military accouterments.

> At twelve, about one third, perhaps one half of the men had collected, and an inspector's return of the number present, and of their arms would have stood nearly thus: 1 captain, 1 lieutenant; ensign, none; fifers, none; privates, present, 24; ditto, absent, 40; guns, 14; gunlocks, 12; ramrods, 10; rifle pouches, 3; bayonets, none; belts, none; spare flints, none; cartridges, none; horsewhips, walking canes, and umbrellas, 10.

A parody of a well-trained troop then follows, with soldiers unable properly to hold or discharge their weapons, with ranks "higglety pigglety" because the soldiers "found it convenient to follow the shade; and in huddling to the left for this purpose, they changed the figure of their line from that of a crescent to one which more nearly resembled a pair of pothooks."

All of this amuses, and then becomes ironic when the reader considers the first-rate Army that would be forged from these men's descendants little more than two generations later.

Jokes about horses abound, as do tales of con men (a staple of the frontier), coquettes, gamblers, and pranksters. Perhaps the greatest aspect of *Georgia Scenes* is its portrayal of the frontier as a place open to almost anyone, and any idea. The prejudices that eventually burden older societies had not yet descended on the

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new settlers, a point that is perhaps best made in the scene titled "A Sage Conversation," in which the jokester Ned Brace tells several old women the story of two men who loved each other and so got married and raised a family together. One of the worthy dames asks Ned how these two men could possibly have had children.

"'. . . I suppose you won't mind telling an old woman how it was.'"

"'Certainly not, madam. They were both widowers before they fell in love with each other and got married.'"

"'The lackaday! I wonder none of us thought o' that. And they had children before they got married?'"

"'Yes, madam; they had none afterward that I heard of.'"

Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, like other Southern writers of his time, was not primarily a writer. Indeed, he was a man of varied experience: lawyer, judge, politician, newspaper editor, farmer, husband, father, clergyman, college president *and* author. Published in 1835, his *Georgia Scenes* is at least as important and accomplished a book as Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, which appeared in 1837—but, unfortunately, the persistent dismissal of antebellum Southern literature by a literary establishment based first in New England and then in New York has kept all but scholars from a close acquaintance with the book. Nevertheless, recent critics argue that *Georgia Scenes* actually initiates the American tradition of Realism; if that is so, it is yet another reason why teachers should read this book and assign it to their students.

Another nineteenth-century work of Southern literature that goes far to dispel the myth of the South as a literature-challenged region before the Civil War is Johnson Jones Hooper's *Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs* (1845). Also in the Southwest humor tradition, this book was widely read and influential. Mark Twain is Hooper's most famous heir—indeed, remarkable similarities exist between certain scenes in *Simon Suggs* and *Huckleberry Finn*—but other humorists also owe much to him. The book, frequently reprinted throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, fell slowly out of consciousness in the 1960s. Like *Georgia Scenes*, it well deserves the revival J.S. Sanders is giving it. Simon Suggs is *American* ingenuity personified: he's a con man, he's flexible, he's funny, and he's an archetypal American. His most famous saying is: "It is good to be shifty in a

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new country." And as he proves time and time again, "Mother-wit can beat booklarnin' at *any* game." On such truisms is our country built.

However, the lighthearted humor that characterizes these early books undergoes a sea change as the Civil War approaches. Mark Twain, though the best-known inheritor of these comic gifts, lacks the lighter touch of his forebears. Twain's humor is edged with despair and nihilism, and this is true of all of the Southern humorists writing from the 1850s on.

Indeed, no other event had a more profound influence on Southern literature than the War Between the States. Perhaps no other event could have produced the outpouring of literature that this one did: a conflict on the scale of the *Iliad*, pitting brother against brother, a country against itself. The Civil War, the South's ultimate Lost Cause, gave rise to everything from American standards like "Dixie" to generational epics such as those produced by William Faulkner. From death came rebirth: the Southern Renascence can be directly traced to the death of the Old South inflicted by the loss of the Civil War.

The bitterness of feeling between North and South during and after the War is hard to capture accurately without going back to the primary documents themselves. Fortunately, scores of letters, memoirs, and speeches exist to show us what (white) Southerners were thinking and feeling as their land, their men, and their way of life were destroyed before their eyes. Sanders has collected and reprinted some of the best of these accounts, and though not in the Southern Classics Series, *The War the Women Lived* is a book well worth reading for anyone interested in this period of American history. The excerpts, wisely chosen by Walter Sullivan so that they include many previously unheard voices in addition to the well-known ones of women like Mary Boykin Chesnut, are absolutely riveting. Of course, they are not "representative" of Southern women, for they do not include either slave women or, for the most part, poor women. But they are important nevertheless. This is the sort of book that should be read side by side with Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* to show the range of female perspectives on the antebellum and war-torn American South.

These women understood the enormity of Secession for the

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South. Perhaps Sarah Rice Pryor, the wife of a Congressman from Virginia, said it best in her journal:

> This was the tremendous event which was to change all our lives—to give us poverty for riches, mutilation and wounds for strength and health, obscurity and degradation for honor and distinction, exile and loneliness for inherited homes and friends, pain and death for happiness and life.

What Pryor outlines here is brought home vividly by several of the women memoirists who were nurses during the War. One passage by Phoebe Yates Pember, a nurse in Richmond in 1862, shows the pathos of this aspect of the war.

> One man . . . enlisted my earnest sympathy. He was a Marylander although serving in a Virginia company. There was such a strength of resignation in his calm blue eye.
>
> "Can you give me a moment?" he said.
>
> "What shall I do for you?"
>
> "Give me some drink to revive me, that I do not die before the surgeon can attend to me."
>
> His pulse was strong but irregular, and telling him that a stimulant might induce fever, and ought only to be administered with a doctor's prescription, I inquired where he was wounded.
>
> Right through the body. Alas!
>
> The doctor's dictum was, "No hope: give him anything he asks for;" but five days and nights I struggled against this decree, fed my patient with my own hands, using freely from the small store of brandy in my pantry and cheering him by words and smiles. The sixth morning on my entrance he turned an anxious eye on my face, and hope had died out of his, for the cold sweat stood in beads there, useless to dry, so constantly were they renewed.
>
> What comfort could I give? Only silently open the Bible, and read to him without comment the ever-living promises of his Maker. Glimpses too of that abode where the "weary are at rest." Tears stole down his cheek, but he was not comforted.
>
> "I am an only son," he said, "and my mother is a widow. Go to her, if you ever get to Baltimore and tell her that I died in what I consider the defense of civil rights and liberties. I may be wrong. God alone knows. Say how kindly I was nursed, and that I had all I needed. I cannot thank you, for I have no breath, but we will meet up there." He pointed upward and closed his eyes, that never opened again upon this world.

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War nurses the world over and in every stage of history will recognize a scene such as this one. And it was played out over and over during the Civil War, both North and South.

Sarah Morgan, a nineteen-year-old Louisiana girl at the start of the war, had brothers on both sides of the conflict. In 1863, she, her mother, several relatives and house slaves were fleeing their plantation to take refuge with the brother who was a Union sympathizer. Hers is one of the many commentaries on these white women's relationships with their black slaves:

> Tired of being spoiled . . . I insisted on being allowed to sleep on a mattress on the floor, after a vigorous skirmish with mother and Miriam, in which I came off victorious. . . . To my share fell a double blanket, which, as Tiche had no cover, I unfolded, and as she used the foot of my bed for a pillow, gave her the other end of it, thus (tell it not in Yankee land, for it will never be credited!) actually sleeping under the same bed clothes with our black, shiny negro nurse!

What one sees in these excerpts, quite frequently, is a close—familial almost—relationship between these white women and their black house servants. Certainly, racism tinges many of the accounts, but by no means all of them. Politically correct historians have tended to miss the nuances—and the complexities—of this feudal society.

Women in these diaries praise the bravery and chivalry of Union soldiers as well as their own Confederates; their morality is not perverted by the War, though the War has perverted completely the world they once inhabited. Kate Cumming, who served as a nurse in Georgia during the last two years of the conflict, castigates a Confederate officer who killed a prisoner in his charge.

> There might be some excuse for a man in the heat of battle refusing to take prisoners, when he saw his comrades slain around him, but this captain had no such excuse. He has been guilty of murder, and of the most cowardly kind.
>
> I have earnestly prayed that, when the history of this war is written, all the dark pages may be on the side of the enemy; but alas! for poor frail humanity, such is not to be the case.

By 1864, the South had become inured to suffering; the war was being lost, but the women retained their courage. They had

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grown used to death and horror, as a passage from the diary of Kate Stone, a young Mississippian, makes clear.

> I did not think two months ago I would ever dance or care to talk nonsense again. But one grows callous to suffering and death. We can live only in the present, only from day to day. We cannot bear to think of the past and so dread the future. The refugees remind me of the description of the life the nobility of France lived during the days of the French Revolution—thrusting all the cares and tragedies of life aside and drinking deep of life's joys while it lasted.

In Richmond during the last year of the War, suppers and dances alternated with scenes of carnage for the highest officers of the Confederate Army. Mary Boykin Chesnut, walking home from a dinner party with General Breckinridge, remarked that he had spent a happy evening. "I do not know," he answered. "I have asked myself more than once to-night, 'Are you the same man who stood gazing down on the faces of the dead on that awful battle-field? The soldiers lying there stare at you with their eyes wide open. Is this the same world? Here and there?'"

The final months of the War, the final degradations of Sherman's march across Georgia to the sea, the return of the war-worn soldiers, were pitiful. Céline Frémaux, a young teen during the war, captured the despair in her diary.

> Alas, when the war ended, the way of its ending was so sad that no one dressed up or made any show of joy, for next to the few that came home, hovered the shadow of those who would never return, and through the tears that veiled all those sad mothers' eyes, the forms of the dear departed seemed to be more distinct than the wretched living, sobbing men, who silently crept to their ruined fireside.

Phoebe Yates Pember, trying to feed her wounded soldiers at the close of the War, gives the reader some wonderful lore on war-toughened rats. "Hunger had educated their minds and sharpened their reasoning faculties. . . . They examined traps with the air of connoisseurs, sometimes springing them from a safe position, and kicked over the bread spread with butter and strychnine to show their contempt for such underhand warfare." For those who are fond of Southern cooking, perhaps this recipe for roast rat will appeal:

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> The rat must be skinned, cleaned, his head cut off and his body laid open upon a square board, the legs stretched to their full extent and secured upon it with small tacks, then baste with bacon fat and roast before a good fire like canvas-back ducks.

Yum!

As someone who grew up south of Savannah, I found riveting the Georgia diarists' accounts of General Sherman's march to the sea. Dolly Lunt Burge, who had been running her plantation alone since the death of her husband, stood right in the line of Sherman's march. Her account of the pillaging soldiers, her faithful slaves forced against their will into the Union Army, the occasional kindness of a Northern officer make page-turning reading. Sherman, whose march ended at Columbia, South Carolina, burnt to the ground the Southern capital that had begun the Civil War. Emma LeConte, a Columbian, watched the conflagration, "one surging ocean of flame . . . more like the medieval pictures of hell than anything she had ever imagined." Richmond burned next and finally on 9 April 1865, Lee surrendered.

Whatever sympathy the North first extended to the defeated South was rapidly withdrawn with the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. Many of the Confederacy's leaders fled the Lost South for the Western frontier. As the army broke up, Eliza Andrews, a Georgian, observed that

> everybody is demoralized and reckless and nobody seems to care about anything anymore. The props that held society up are broken. Everything is in a state of disorganization and tumult. We have no currency, no law save the primitive code that might makes right. We are in a transition state from war to subjugation, and it is far worse than was the transition from peace to war. The suspense and anxiety in which we live are terrible.

And so did the war end for the South, with one in every four men dead, with many of the returning soldiers permanently mutilated—as the land itself was mutilated—with starvation and with lawlessness. It was an unforgettable war, and for a century it provided the primary theme of Southern literature.

Of the later nineteenth-century writers who took the Civil War for their subject, perhaps the most influential in his own time was Thomas Nelson Page. J.S. Sanders has reprinted here Page's most important book, *In Ole Virginia*, which appeared contemporane-

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ously with Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—and to much greater acclaim in its own era. By the 1880s, even Northerners had begun to look upon Reconstruction as a failed experiment. Both sides felt a new urge for reconciliation and the healing of old wounds. Northerners were willing to see that there had indeed been bravery and honor in the South's Lost Cause; Southerners were able to accept their restoration to the Union without giving up their belief that the Confederacy's cause had been honorable. Thomas Nelson Page was instrumental in bringing the two sides together; his *In Ole Virginia* both soothed the South's wounded pride and gave Northern readers a view of the Old South that did not offend, but, rather, touched them.

Page's narrative device, however, is one that is likely to offend late-twentieth-century readers. Many of these stories are told from the point of view of loyal black bondsmen fondly remembering their masters. By no means is this a new device in literature—many, many works are told through the perceptions and voice of a faithful retainer (such as Sancho Panza, to name one of the most famous)—but it is a device that implies a symbiotic relationship between master and slave that our own era finds anathema.

Be that as it may, Page's greatest gift is his ability to render the authentic voices, in vernacular, of both blacks and whites in his native Virginia. Many have praised Mark Twain for this talent, including Lionel Trilling in a famous essay, without realizing that Thomas Nelson Page was equally if not more famous in his own time for his command of Southern dialect and for his stories told in the vernacular. Where Page's work veers sharply away from Twain's, however, is in its attitude. *In Ole Virginia* is sentimental rather than satirical; it romanticizes the plantation, laying the groundwork for that melodramatic school of later Southern literature, the "moonlight and magnolia" novel. Indeed, observant readers of Page's stories will note that Margaret Mitchell lifted whole scenes and characters straight from their pages into her own *Gone With the Wind.*

But for this essay, let me present just a small taste of what Page does well. He doubles his black and white characters so that a faithful slave is raised side by side with a white master, usually going on to marry the personal attendant of the white mistress with whom the master falls in love. Their lives entwine and echo each other, even though one occurs above and the other below

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stairs. The mutual affection is inalienable; the cadences of the speech for the characters, their dialect, are accurately rendered, as in the passage below from "Unc' Edinburg's Drowndin'."

> "Well, you know, Marse George was jes' eighteen when he went to college. I went wid him, 'cause me an' him wuz de same age; I was born like on a Sat'day in de Christmas, an' he wuz born in de new year on a Chuesday, an' my mammy nussed us bofe at one breast. Dat's de reason maybe huccome we took so to one nurr. He sutney set a heap o' sto' by me; an' I ain' nuver see nobody yit wuz good to me as Marse George."

The nursing at the same breast is important here, for it served both an historical and a symbolic function in works like Page's: the boys share a familial relationship. In all of these stories, it is the enduring black characters who provide the community for the white master's family. They are bound together by shared mother's milk, a shared responsibility to the land, and, quite frequently—as Faulkner would later point out in his saga—a shared ancestry. The black characters are the shadow selves of the white ones, and they frequently prove themselves stronger. In "Meh Lady: A Story of the War" (my favorite in this collection), the black retainer who narrates the story ultimately becomes the sole caretaker and provider for the white family who once owned him. When the white family's daughter finally marries—a Union officer—it is the black former slave who gives away the bride. In turn, she names her first son after him.

Thomas Nelson Page is yet another nineteenth-century Southern writer whom students and professors of American literature alike need to know more about. He was immensely popular and influential in his own time, but his works have been avoided in our day because they underscore the affectionate relationships between some slaves and masters. Again, such a concept does not fit in with our culture's ideology about slavery. The problem, of course, with either romanticizing slavery (all slaves were happy and singing on the plantation), or demonizing it (all slaves were brutalized and terrorized by evil masters on the plantation), is that either view is reductive, inaccurate. Those two views are the black and white extremes of a way of life that was, in fact, distinctly grey. It may be that it is historically impossible from our own vantage point to retrieve with any degree of accuracy the planta-

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tion as it actually existed. But we should try to accept that this way of life was not only central to the first two centuries of American history, but that it has bequeathed us much of our current way of life and our way of perceiving the world.

Nevertheless, by the twentieth century white Southern writers were trying to show the plantation as an ambivalent institution—profoundly good in some ways and profoundly flawed in others. J.S. Sanders reprints several of these works in the Classics series, but some are more compelling than others. I found Owen Wister's 1905 novel of Charleston "society," *Lady Baltimore*, a profound bore, but Stark Young's *So Red the Rose* clearly deserving of its status as the best seller of 1934. Indeed, it's a considerably better novel than Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, which followed it by a few years and became the plantation novel whose reputation endured (no doubt aided by the immense success of the film version with Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh).

Caroline Gordon, an immensely important Southern writer, also wrote several sagas of Southern plantation life, and J.S. Sanders has done the notable good deed of reviving her work for modern readers. Her *Penhally* (1931) sounds eerily like a female variant of Faulkner's stream-of-consciousness Southern novel. Her *None Shall Look Back* (1937) takes Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* and turns that novel's cynicism inside-out. *None Shall Look Back* celebrates the Confederate soldier as a hero on a parallel with any warrior in Homer's *Iliad*. Nevertheless, for this reader, the best of Gordon's novels is the one that doesn't deal with the Civil War, but takes on a period of history well before it. *Green Centuries* (1941) is Gordon's masterpiece, and it deserves an audience in our time.

In this book, Gordon tells the story of the settling of Tennessee by North Carolinians fleeing the greedy Royalist government of the 1760s. A brilliantly wrought tale in terms of character, incident, language, and landscape, *Green Centuries* portrays an aspect of Southern history that few scholars seem to focus on nowadays (because most of their attention is directed to the history of slavery)—the displacing of the Cherokee Nation by land-hungry white settlers.

> After the men rode off she stood on in the dooryard enjoying the morning cool. Here in front of the house the ground was dusty but

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> over in the woods you could see dew glistening. She walked to the edge of the clearing. There was a little path there that the children had made. She took a few steps along it. A big mullein came up beside the path. Its high-headed stalk was yellow with the tiny flowers, the broad, hairy leaves at the base of the stalk looked as if they had been brushed with dew. She pulled a leaf; it was velvet between her fingers. When she was little they always used mullein for dolls' blankets, but her children had it for cabbages. . . . She looked up. Over her head rose the black branches of the sugar trees and above them, layer on layer of green. The leaves had broadened and darkened just in the last few days. It was full summer. The season had turned without her noticing it. It was full summer now! She looked along the path and would have walked a little farther into the woods and then she remembered that she had stopped in the midst of straining the milk to tell the men goodbye. Cream would start rising if she let it set much longer.
>
> She went back into the house. The children were playing over by the hearth, and Frank had come up from the lower room and was rocking the baby's crib.

Gordon's book dovetails nicely with another in Sanders' Southern Classics Series, *The Tennessee* (1946), by Donald Davidson. The collegial relationship between these two writers—Gordon's husband Allen Tate had been a close associate of Davidson at Vanderbilt, and was, with him, a "Fugitive Poet"—probably provided Gordon with a chance to examine Davidson's research on the history of Tennessee. While Davidson wrote a nonfiction account of the cultures that succeeded each other beside the Tennessee River, Gordon used the same material to craft a novel. Archy and Orion Outlaw are Gordon's unforgettable protagonists; Davidson's main character is the river—the Tennessee itself—and, it, too, is unforgettable.

It was also untamable for several centuries. As Davidson explains, "to get up and down the Tennessee one needed not only to combine the virtues of the horse and alligator, but to add something of the frog, snapping turtle, raccoon, buffalo, and shikepoke." Its shoals and twists were legendary and treacherous. Not until the engineers of the Tennessee Valley Authority came along, well into the twentieth century, could the river be conquered and domesticated. And this, it seems, is a fact that Davidson mourns as much as he mourns the passing of other, older societies that once lived along the river:

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> The Tennessee is now a civil and obliging stream. . . . Tourists stare at it in immaculate safety from observation booths placed on points where long ago, it was as much as a man's life was worth to be seen. The Indians are gone, and the Indian river wears the manacles and dress of civilization. How all this came about is a long story and a strange one. It begins with legend. It ends with statistics.

This is a fine story and an important one. Like Caroline Gordon, Davidson paints a sympathetic portrait of the Indians who inhabited the lands around the river at the time of the white European's irruption into what would become America.

Davidson describes the ancient Mayan tribes, offshoots of which first populated the area and built some of the mounds and fortifications still to be found there. He analyzes the data from anthropologists and archaeologists and summarizes it in thoughtful, appealing prose. Readers learn about the ancient peoples of the region as well as the newer arrivals—such as Hernando de Soto in 1540. De Soto and his troops (conquistadors in full armor) marched up the coast from Florida to Tennessee. Worn out from their arduous journey, they luckily encountered friendly natives, the Chiaha, who wined and dined them until the Spaniards wore out their welcome by stealing from the natives' corncribs and kidnapping a chief. Driven from Tennessee, de Soto went on to Alabama and Mississippi where his troops fared badly in battles with the Indians of those regions and ultimately lost themselves in the wilderness around the Mississippi River. Fortunately, narrative accounts from members of de Soto's expedition remain, and they tell us a great deal about these early encounters between Native Americans and Europeans. As Davidson recounts:

> [The Indians] were courteous and dignified in intercourse with the white men, and were not one whit abashed in the presence of civilization. They were generous—more generous than the Spaniards—as long as they had reason to think the strangers were friends who might be treated as honored guests. But they were valorous and skillful in combat when they discovered that the honored guests were no better than freebooters.

After de Soto left, the Cherokee tribes enjoyed another two centuries without outside interference—and then the American settlers appeared.

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Before he gets to them, however, Davidson meticulously details the Cherokee culture of that time—its myths, rituals, games, government. Davidson makes the case that the flexibility of the Cherokees is what ultimately did them in. As adaptable as they were, they adapted too quickly to the ways and goods of the white man. They enjoyed European guns and other luxuries, and they fought intertribally over the Europeans' settlement of the land. Ultimately, their infighting prevented them from uniting to repulse the pioneers and ultimately the pioneers vanquished them—and banished them from their ancestral lands. One of the saddest moments in American history goes by the name "The Trail of Tears": the exile of the Cherokee people to reservations in the West. The Indian Removal Bill was passed in 1830; forcible removal began in 1838. Johnson Jones Hooper captures some of this in his *Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs*—Suggs buys (and speculates on) land that a Cherokee squaw is forced to sell by the new government's policy—but Davidson's account has a deftness that is heart-wrenching.

All of the major players appear in these pages, from the half-Scots/half-Cherokee chieftains who fought the removal to the end (the regular intermarrying of Highlands Scots with Native Americans is an interesting passage of American history in itself), to the American soldiery that enforced it. Davidson has bolstered his tale with primary documents whenever possible, and he has here the eloquent account of James Mooney. Mooney later interviewed participants in the removal and one, a man who later served as a Colonel in the Confederate army reminisced, "I fought through the Civil War and have seen men shot to death and slaughtered by thousands, but the Cherokee Removal was the cruelest work I ever knew."

Both Davidson in his two volumes on the Tennessee and Caroline Gordon in *Green Centuries* note the rapaciousness of the European settlers who came to America with an insatiable land hunger. As so many of these Southern Classics underscore, the history of America is really the history of the frontier—and the South was the first part of America to push that frontier westward. The frontier is a mobile designation and in many ways a metaphysical one, but what it stands for is something concrete: land. The history of Southern literature is really the history of this land and its tenants—those who revered the land and found a spiritual

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link to it, and those who abused the land, who put others into bondage to cultivate a plot of earth they believed they "owned."

Robert Penn Warren's *Night Rider* (1939), his first novel, also restored to print by Sanders, recounts the "tobacco wars" that took place in Kentucky and Tennessee early in this century. The novel, like Warren's best work *All the King's Men*, pits an innocent idealist against his own dawning awareness of the immoral role he has played in the battle between tobacco farmers and tobacco company owners for the produce of the land. Ironically, many of the evils of Southern history—the Cherokee removal and slavery, to name the two worst—derive from its most valued feature: its enormously rich and productive land.

Madison Jones's *The Innocent* (1957) is a Southern Classic that subverts the Southerner's worship of the land. Jones's novel closely resembles Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*, and it brings to mind the title of another novel by another famous Southern writer: *You Can't Go Home Again*. Jones's hero returns to his rural birthplace after a long life in a Northern city. He returns seeking an innocence he believes he'll find on his family's farm. However, he and the reader discover that such an ideal never really existed there. The primitive rural folk whom he has been accustomed to imagining as pure in heart and refreshingly simple turn out to be neither. They resist his idealism and are more complex than he imagines them, just as the Cherokee proved more complex than either the "noble" or the "brutal savage" categories into which eighteenth-century settlers tried to lump them. Jones's view of the Southerner's love of the agrarian life is an essentially cynical one, and it contrasts sharply with the vision of many of his peers.

One such peer, or perhaps mentor—for he was Jones's fiction teacher at the University of Florida—is Andrew Lytle. Lytle appears on the Southern Classics list with both a biography (of the infamous Confederate cavalryman, Bedford Forrest) and a memoir, *A Wake for the Living*. I say "memoir," but actually this book defies genre. It is autobiographical, historical, and philosophical at the same time. Lytle was the only one of the Agrarians who practiced what he preached—he went back to the land and farmed it—and this book attempts to explain, *from experience*, the Agrarian defense of the Old South based on its agricultural society.

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The land, Lytle argues, gives a sense of responsibility to those who nurture it. Those who nurture it become first families—with bonds and responsibilities among themselves—and then communities, with responsibilities to one another. This, for Lytle, is the basis of both good morality and good government.

> I want to make a grand leap in time and say that the stable force of the state is the family. This may seem a platitude, but wait. Its form is the most perfect for man in his fallen condition. In its private life the family is a whole with members and connections, while publicly it is a unit in a larger whole, the state.

Lytle's reference here to "fallen man" emphasizes the other bond that linked Southerners and their society: a deep belief in Christianity and its tenets. Almost from the beginning, the South was seen as a Garden of Eden, a place to escape from the corruptions of the European city and, later, the industrializing cities of the Northeast. Of course, there was always a snake in the garden—slavery—an evil that neither the Enlightenment thinkers (such as Jefferson) could vanquish, nor the later Agrarians, such as Lytle. The South's best traits—connection to and love of land and Nature; a Christian sense of morality and responsibility—were always inextricably entangled with its worst traits—the notion that land could be "possessed," that people who would work it could be "owned." Thomas Jefferson tried to rationalize slavery in the Garden of Eden motif by insisting that there had to be "gardeners in the garden," but slavery was always the serpent therein, the Original Sin that would eventually bring down that Agrarian community.

Interestingly, one sees snake imagery quite frequently in Southern literature (perhaps because one sees snakes quite frequently in the Southern landscape!), and the snake remains a potent symbol for Southerners because of its biblical connection to the Adam and Eve story of loss and redemption. Even Lytle comments on his first encounter with a snake on Cornsilk, his family's place, when he tries to return there as both a writer and a farmer. He looks up from the log where he has perched his typewriter and sees a snake chasing a frog, "but the frog made it up a tree as the snake struck the bark. He then crawled into a pile of dead brush without shaking a leaf or making a sound. He turned and looked at me, and I looked back. But only for a while. His eyes

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were too steady. I lost my nerve and killed him." In the end, even Andrew Lytle realized that "you cannot really farm and write," and yet he also concluded that a commitment to the land is more important for humans than a commitment to a vocation away from the land.

But his words, like those of all the Agrarians revived in the Southern Classics series, came too late for the South. By the 1930s, industrialization had set in with a vengeance. Old family farms were broken up and developed; the rural communities that Lytle, Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, and Donald Davidson paid homage to were gone forever. What remained was memory. This group of Southern writers born at the turn of the century stood on the borderline of the past and a very different future. They had known Civil War veterans and former slaves, and had absorbed their stories and collective memory. But they also lived through the period of greatest change in the Southern landscape, as it shifted inexorably from a rural landscape to an industrialized one. By their time, the land as a concrete reality had been lost, but the memories of it remained vivid. That, I think, is why Southerners have such a deep sense of history. William Faulkner, the pre-eminent spokesman of his region, put it best: "The past is not dead, it's not even the past."

With the revival of these important books by John S. Sanders, Southern literature of the past also lives again—and deservedly. The Southern Classics Series serves its subjects well and restores to our awareness some of the South's most important writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These books are also ideal for teachers (as I have discovered, having taught several of them in Southern Fiction and Nineteenth-Century Literature classes this past year) because they come with excellent prefaces by a range of distinguished scholars and Southern writers. These include the late M.E. Bradford (who was the series editor until his death), George Garrett, Madison Smartt Bell, George Core, Thomas H. Landess, and several other first-rate thinkers and writers.

J.S. Sanders & Company has rendered a very important service to a part of Southern history that has been lost in recent decades. Sanders has permitted voices to speak again that had been silenced for too long, such as Allen Tate's voice in his "Ode to the Confederate Dead":

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Now that the salt of their blood
Stiffens the saltier oblivion of the sea,
Seals the malignant purity of the flood,
What shall we who count our days and bow
Our heads with a commemorial woe
In the ribboned coats of grim felicity,
What shall we say of the bones, unclean,
Whose verdurous anonymity will grow?
The ragged arms, the ragged heads and eyes
Lost in these acres of the insane green?
The gray lean spiders come, they come and go;
In a tangle of willows without light
The singular screech-owl's tight
Invisible lyric seeds the mind
With the furious murmur of their chivalry.

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DAVID MASON

Irish Poetry at the Crossroads

When I was born the row began. . . .
—Louis MacNeice

I have a friend whom I think of as the quintessential Dubliner, a veritable volcano of intellectual energies, his mind fired by deep sympathies and vast learning that make him one of the most incandescent conversationalists I have ever met. In the summer of 1996 I had the good fortune to spend a few days with him in Dublin and its environs, places he knows with an intimate historical sense foreign to most Americans. Incapable of dullness, he could talk about almost anything. One moment he surveyed the settings of stories by Joyce or Beckett, the next he cherished the intricacies of cricket, nodding politely at my comparisons to baseball. He recited a massively sinuous sentence by Milton to illustrate verbal athleticism of a related kind, marked how Yeats had learned from such syntax, then darted into the poetry of Virgil, followed by current Irish politics, where he dismissed one government minister with vernacular brio: "The man's as t'ick as two planks!"

America, I sometimes feel, douses its own intellectual fires. Our country is so large, so various, that it both exhilarates and wears us out. I tried conveying this dilemma to my friend, contrasting American to Irish society, where it seems that everyone knows everyone else. Though the Irish may be a private people, they have no anonymity. My friend, of course, responded with an anecdote. We were driving along a residential street, and he told me he had once seen Seamus Heaney strolling along the same avenue and pulled over for a chat. At the time he had French guests with him in the car, and when he eased back into traffic they inquired about the amiable man to whom he had been talking. "Oh that fella?" my friend told them. "That's the fucker who just won the Nobel Prize." He leaned toward me with an

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expression of delight, transforming the word "fucker" to a proud and affectionate superlative.

Dare I say that the range and passion of my friend's conversation is particularly Irish? It seems that Irish writers and intellectuals live in a pressure cooker of linguistic and social strategizing. This can be exhausting—I would never blame an Irish writer for wanting out of the fray—but also quite intoxicating. In his superb, beautifully-written collection of literary essays, *The Pressed Melodeon,* the American poet Ben Howard muses upon the attractiveness of Ireland and its writers to the rest of us.[1] This is a book forged by long experience with Ireland, deep learning about poetry and a talent for exacting observation. Toward the end of his title essay, he writes that

> it is heartening to visit an English-speaking country where the idea of the poet is still taken seriously. Irish writers complain that their culture pays lip service to Poetry while neglecting poets and letting national treasures like Coole Park fall into ruin. Their point is well taken, but it is pleasing, nonetheless, to visit a country where poems are reproduced in holograph on village monuments, where the faces of poets—Swift, Yeats—appear on the currency, where full-time writers are exempt from income tax, and where poets like Kavanagh are remembered so passionately, both by poets and lay people.

I would add that it is deeply refreshing to see politics, history, sport and literature discussed side by side in the letters columns of *The Irish Times* and other papers, and to see poetry discussed in the major media instead of marginalized, as it often is in the United States—just look for poetry reviews in the increasingly vapid *New York Times Book Review* and you'll see what I mean.

We Americans who love Irish poetry do so in part, I think, because we find in it qualities missing from too much of our own: verbal rigor wedded to a strong, if conflicted, social sense, poets who write as if writing mattered. Of course I overgeneralize, but I think Ben Howard is right about Ireland when he discusses "the power of language in a country so politicized, so keenly aware of nuances and innuendoes." I can't gauge the degree to which we sentimentalize Ireland when we think in these terms, yet Irish writers have made similar observations.

[1] THE PRESSED MELODEON, by *Ben Howard.* Story Line Press. $12.95p.

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None of this would matter if Irish writers hadn't written particularly well. But they have. Think of the four Nobel Prize-winners—Yeats, Shaw, Beckett and Heaney—then add Joyce, Flann O'Brien, Frank O'Connor, Patrick Kavanagh, Louis MacNeice and dozens of others. Of course there are dissenting voices, those who would note the all-male list I have just given. Eileen Battersby, an American living in Ireland, observes the injustices of "Ireland's conservative political tradition," and the poet-critic Peter Sirr has identified a similar conservatism in contemporary Irish poetry: "It tends to avoid formal experiment, jealously hoards its clarities, its logic, its trove of paraphrasable content." I confess I have trouble understanding why that's such an awful state of affairs, but I fully understand the perception among women and younger writers that an essentially conservative male cadre dominates Irish literature. In *The Living Stream*, the Belfast critic Edna Longley describes an alternative "aesthetic revisionism": ". . . the formal order established by Heaney, [Michael] Longley and Mahon has been challenged by the equally concentrated but more open-ended methods of Muldoon, Ciaran Carson and Medbh McGuckian." This seems historically accurate; there is a kind of ferment in contemporary Irish literature, but the taste of these younger writers is more academic than avant-garde. Furthermore, as in America, too few critics engage in the difficult task of trying to enunciate aesthetic standards, asking what makes writing good or bad. One poet-critic, Dennis O'Driscoll, even comments on the impossibility of honest reviewing in a country where all the writers know each other.

However we define poetry, it lives, as it has always lived, at a crossroads between tradition and modernity, between notions of eternal truth and change. And however sceptical they may be about themselves, their art or their language, poets are usually in this business for the long haul. A poet may be afraid to believe in eternity, yet write as if the ages mattered, as if poetry were intended to cross time and whisper its intimacies to the ears of strangers. There are many good reasons for thinking that notions of permanence are mad, but great art demands them nonetheless. Ireland's place as an emerging nation, with its youthful energies, its ancient traditions, its Troubles and its grudging embrace of the English language, has given its poets admirable powers. But the crossroads implies choices, and in the following

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pages I will both question and applaud choices these poets have made.

Where to begin? The influence of Yeats on subsequent poets is stronger than their attempts to deny it, and *The Pressed Melodeon* contains fine essays on two other influential figures, MacNeice and Kavanagh. Howard takes his title, though, from a writer who is still very much alive. "To the sorrows of modern Ireland," he writes, "John Montague has brought an historian's understanding and a harper's delicate music. He has kept faith with his lyric gift while bearing witness to violent events." In this sense, Montague is a pivotal figure in contemporary Irish poetry. Wake Forest University Press, which performs a real service by making many Irish poets available in the States, has now brought out Montague's *Collected Poems*, a handsome volume in which we can see much justice in Howard's praise.[2]

Montague's most influential book remains *The Rough Field* (1972), a collage of lyrics, reminiscences, historical fragments and meditations, which he later followed with another book-length sequence, *The Dead Kingdom* (1984). In these books and others, Montague writes of a personal past containing elements of Irish national epic: emigration, poverty, his tough republican father, abandonment by his mother, life in America and on both sides of the Irish border. Ben Howard argues that Montague

> has told the story of Northern Ireland as no other poet has, tracing the present sectarian violence to its roots in Jacobean Ulster. Wary of the "lyric memory" that would "soften the fact" ("Dance Hall"), he has sought "exactness," employing a "low-pitched style" that will not "betray the event." Yet his quiet music has persisted, braced and chastened by its encounters with civil strife.

Given the breadth of this evolving program, it is no disgrace that Montague does not always succeed. I don't think his experiments with free verse, so clearly influenced by William Carlos Williams, always benefit his poems. For example, here are four stanzas from "Omagh Hospital":

[2] COLLECTED POEMS, by *John Montague*. Wake Forest University Press. $31.95; $19.95.

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Your white hair
on the thin rack
of your shoulders

it is hard to
look into the eyes
of the dying

who carry away
a part of oneself—
a shared world

& you, whose life
was selflessness
now die slowly

Williams' best poems are charged by surprising line breaks and pungent, active verbs, but here the "low-pitched style" intended not to "betray the event" seems relatively arbitrary. Call it a weakness, but I say a poet's lines ought to matter as lines a good percentage of the time. This becomes even more problematic for me in *The Dead Kingdom*, nearly the whole book composed in the same narrow columns, some of which could easily be prose. Of course poets perennially argue in this way: how much to weight tradition, how much modernity. My point is simply that a poet's most distinctive resource is the line—everything else can be done in prose—so the medium of the line ought to be used to advantage.

Montague knows what he is doing, and my attention flags only when I read him at length. He has written poems that seem triumphant or nearly so, including "Like Dolmens Round My Childhood . . . ," "Herbert Street Revisited," "A Flowering Absence," "The Locket," "Red Branch," "The Water Carrier," "A Drink of Milk" and "The Trout." One of his strengths is for capturing characters in verse, as he does in "Clear the Way":

Her only revenge on her hasty lovers
Was to call each child after its father,
Which the locals admired, and seeing her saunter

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> To collect the pension of her soldier husband
> Trailed by her army of baby Irregulars.

Using the loaded word "Irregulars" as a stand-in for "bastards" shows real confidence in his audience.

Montague has also been willing to challenge the conservatism of Irish culture by the frankness with which he writes about love and sex: "As my Province burns / I sing of love, / Hoping to give that fiery / Wheel a shove." Here is his poem to the Celtic earth goddess often depicted on Irish churches, "Sheela Na Gig":

> The bloody tent-flap opens. We slide
> into life, slick with slime and blood.
> Cunt or Cymric *cwm*, Chaucerian *quente*,
> the first home from which man is sent
> into banishment, to spend his whole life
> cruising to return, raising a puny mast
> to sail back into those moist lips
> that overhang *labia minora* and *clitoris*.
> To sigh and die upon the Mount of Venus,
> layer after layer of warm moss,
> to return to that first darkness!
> Small wonder she grins at us, from gable
> or church wall. For the howling babe
> life's warm start: man's question mark.

Ultimately, re-reading Montague's work, I find a breadth that sometimes sacrifices the heights of poetry to capture private and public histories; his *Collected Poems* is terribly important to any understanding of Irish poetry at the perpetual crossroads of tradition and modernity.

The contemporary Irish poet I like best is Derek Mahon, some of whose lyrics I find literally unforgettable. Perhaps he doesn't have the breadth of Montague or the warmth of Heaney, but as Ben Howard convincingly argues, Mahon raises irony to a level "of prophetic vision." He has long been a formal master, as one can see in poems like "In Carrodore Churchyard," "The Terminal Bar," "Afterlives," "Everything Is Going to Be All Right" and "Dawn at St. Patrick's." Other critics note the humanizing ironies of poems like "The Mute Phenomena," "A Disused Shed in Co.

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Wexford," "Lives" and "The Snow Party." Throughout much of his work Mahon seems, like Louis MacNeice, an uncomfortable Irishman, often writing from abroad with a cosmopolitan sense of the world. In his review of *The Hunt By Night*, Ben Howard begins, "Exile is the birthright of the Irish poet," then brilliantly demonstrates that such exile is not only geographical but psychological as well, the poet holding himself at bay.

Recently Mahon has dared to be more personal and direct; I don't think it has harmed him. His new book, *The Hudson Letter*, shows him at work in a more loose-limbed manner, but the level of his achievement remains extremely high.[3] *The Hudson Letter* is really two books, the first published by Gallery Press in Ireland, the second, revised edition by Wake Forest. I regret only one change Mahon has made, dropping "The Yaddo Letter" from the American edition, probably because it is also available in one version of his recent *Selected Poems*. Otherwise, it seems to me that, by removing some weaker poems, he has greatly clarified the intellectual lineaments of the collection.

The title sequence comprises eighteen poems that range over life in New York (where Mahon has taught at NYU), thoughts on women and feminism arising in the aftermath of divorce, and the lives of other "exiles" in New York like W.H. Auden and J.B. Yeats. Occasionally in heroic couplets, the poems never stray far from pentamenter, though Mahon's meters are sometimes quite free. His range of diction, derived from street slang, TV, popular music, newspapers, opera, classical and modern authors, is wonderfully unpredictable, as if Mahon had simply given himself permission to have fun with the epistolary tradition. But the sequence is also subtly guided by its themes. Here the poet addresses one of his children:

> . . . and yet, across 3,000 miles of water
> and five time zones, my own prayer for my daughter
> would be, not innocence and ceremony
> exactly, but a more complicated grace,
> the sort of thing you play on the boxed lyre when
> you're alone

[3] THE HUDSON LETTER, by *Derek Mahon*. Wake Forest University Press. $31.95; $19.95.

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in the House of Atreus, something slow and meditative,
some rich myth of reconciliation
as if a statue moved and began to live—
for I like to think all this is a winter's tale
around a hearth (but whose?); and that when we tell
the story ten years hence you'll be able to say,
'Thou mettest with things dying, I with things new-born.'

That moving statue alludes not only to Shakespeare and reconciliation; it also suggests Ovid's version of Pygmalion and Galatea, with all its ambiguities about creation and desire. Mahon's beautiful translation of the Ovid passage is, in fact, the second poem in the present collection. The first is "Noon at St. Michael's," detailing a relationship with a real woman who has apparently reminded the poet just how real she is. *The Hudson Letter* appears to be partly a book about facing women—ex-wife, lover, daughter—as real beings rather than as symbols. The one translation from the Irish he includes is a poem by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, justly celebrated for her sensuality, but in this case a poem about rejection: "Outside / the warm conspiracy of your love / I stand, a nobody, / an orphan at the door."

Ovid and Shakespeare, exile, desire and reconciliation—these were contained in the address to his daughter I quoted, but he also imagined a song in the House of Atreus, a place of slaughter and a source of tragedy. When he later writes, "The reed-voiced nightingale has been my guide," Mahon adopts the voice of Sappho: "Nothing was alien to me, nothing inhuman: / what did I teach but the love of women?" He follows that section with another called "Beauty and the Beast," dedicated to Fay Wray. Perhaps some of this is explained in the section on J.B. Yeats: "Thus your epiphany, and you wrote to explain: / 'The nightingale sings with its breast against a thorn, / it's out of pain that personality is born'. . . ." But Mahon won't leave it at that; he follows the romantic nightingale with the more comical yellow bittern, famous in Irish poetry for having died from lack of drink. With its varied meditations on love, beauty and responsibility, *The Hudson Letter* is a magnificently playful book, intricately designed and executed, a worthy addition to the Mahon canon.

For a time, Mahon's roommate at Trinity College was another Belfast poet, Michael Longley, whose work has received far less

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attention than that of Mahon and Heaney. Reading through Longley's earlier *Selected Poems*, it does seem that he has taken longer to write poems that are distinctly his own. With *Gorse Fires* and, now, *The Ghost Orchid*, Longley has established his reputation.[4] It's striking just how much of his best work derives from translation, particularly of Homer and Ovid. This is a genially learned poet who has stayed on in Belfast through the Troubles—and even survived a career as an arts administrator. There's something both precise and unpretentious in his work, a kind of monument to civility and love in a brutalized society. In the new book I especially like the playfulness of "The Mad Poet," the gravity of "Ivory & Water" and "Baucis and Philemon." But, like it or not, *The Ghost Orchid* will always be known as the book in which Longley published "Ceasefire."

Few Americans can know the impact this one sonnet has had since its publication, by lucky accident, in *The Irish Times* the day after the IRA announced its ceasefire in 1994. In the weeks before, the Troubles had been particularly bloody, so the new negotiations gave Ireland its most hopeful reprieve in a generation—now, alas, spoiled yet again. At the time too few people realized that Longley's poem perfectly expressed the dilemma a ceasefire would present; in its euphoria over peace, the general population would try to forget the very real wounds and griefs of those who had actually lost family in the struggle. The woundedness and hatred would not just disappear, but would underlie any reconciliation, waiting to be acknowledged. Here is Longley's superb poem (borrowing from Homer):

I

Put in mind of his own father and moved to tears
Achilles took him by the hand and pushed the old king
Gently away, but Priam curled up at his feet and
Wept with him until their sadness filled the building.

II

Taking Hector's corpse into his own hands Achilles

[4] THE GHOST ORCHID, by *Michael Longley*. Wake Forest University Press. $15.95; $9.95.

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Made sure it was washed and, for the old king's sake,
Laid out in uniform, ready for Priam to carry
Wrapped like a present home to Troy at daybreak.

III

When they had eaten together, it pleased them both
To stare at each other's beauty as lovers might,
Achilles built like a god, Priam good-looking still
And full of conversation, who earlier had sighed:

IV

'I get down on my knees and do what must be done
And kiss Achilles' hand, the killer of my son.'

The bitterness of reconciliation in the poem's final couplet is the last thing we encounter, yet Priam made this statement at a moment before the rest of the poem takes place. Longley's rearrangement of chronology leaves us with the grief we had hoped would wither away. All the conflicted feelings are there, memorably expressed, and I have no reservations whatsoever in saying that "Ceasefire" is one of the most important poems of Longley's generation.

The fact that some of his best work (and some of Mahon's) derives from translation leads me to the curious case of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill; I want to call her a fine poet, but I cannot read her in the original Irish. I never know whether what delights me in her work is attributable to her or to the many poets who have translated her. From interviews and articles about her, I have the sense of a highly intelligent, articulate and worldly person whose commitment to Irish is truly a poetic one, born of a passion for the language. Beyond that, I'm in her translators' considerable debt.

And she has been lucky. *Pharaoh's Daughter* contains poems translated by Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon, Paul Muldoon, Michael Hartnett, Medbh McGuckian, John Montague—in short, by the cream of the Irish poetry establishment.[5] Along with other

[5] PHARAOH'S DAUGHTER, by *Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill.* Wake Forest University Press. $10.95p.

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poets like Gabriel Rosenstock, Ní Dhomhnaill has made it her business to modernize the Irish tongue; in doing so, she preserves and reformulates a rich historical and mythological heritage. But she does this without seeming exclusively local. I can't prove it, but I sense that—by writing in Irish and working with translators—Ní Dhomhnaill makes things accessible to us that we wouldn't encounter by other means. One example of good work in *Pharaoh's Daughter* is "Aubade," translated by Michael Longley:

> It's all the same to morning what it dawns on—
> On the bickering of jackdaws in leafy trees;
> On that dandy from the wetlands, the green mallard's
> Stylish glissando among reeds; on the moorhen
> Whose white petticoat flickers around the boghole;
> On the oystercatcher on tiptoe at low tide.
>
> It's all the same to the sun what it rises on—
> On the windows in houses in Georgian squares;
> On bees swarming to blitz suburban gardens;
> On young couples yawning in unison before
> They do it again; on dew like sweat or tears
> On lilies and roses; on your bare shoulders.
>
> But it isn't all the same to us that night-time
> Runs out; that we must make do with today's
> Happenings, and stoop and somehow glue together
> The silly little shards of our lives, so that
> Our children can drink water from broken bowls,
> Not cupped hands. It isn't the same at all.

Wake Forest has also published Ní Dhomhnaill's new collection, *The Astrakhan Cloak*, translated by the erratically talented Paul Muldoon.[6] Once again the best poems seem fresh and natural, as good translations should: "There's a crack in the flight of stairs / at my very core / that I simply can't get round or traverse." Like Muldoon himself, Ní Dhomhnaill can enjoy diss-

[6] THE ASTRAKHAN CLOAK, by *Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill.* Wake Forest University Press. $15.95; $9.95.

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ing an old myth. Just compare Yeats's early versions of Mother Ireland to Ní Dhomhnaill's "Cathleen":

> You can't take her out for a night on the town
> without her either showing you up or badly letting you down:
> just because she made the Twenties roar
> with her Black and Tan bottom—O Terpsichore—
> and her hair in a permanent wave. . . .

The mention of Cathleen reminds me that the Irish language is not the only context in which Ní Dhomhnaill's poems have been discussed. There is also the issue of feminism in a country that has been famously backward concerning women's rights. Among women poets, Eavan Boland has made the loudest noise about the difficulties she has faced, and now that she has her American professorship (at Stanford), one would hope she would feel confident enough to concentrate on writing stronger poems. The truth is, there are several very good poets in Ireland—Paula Meehan and Mary O'Malley spring to mind, among others—who seem sure enough of themselves to write as women without self-aggrandizing political pronouncements (though Boland should be credited for clearing a space for them). Insofar as I can judge, Ní Dhomhnaill seems part of their company. Some of her poems go on longer than necessary, risking shapelessness, but the best of them suggest that the subheading "Irish Women Poets" might legitimately be retired.

I'm less confident about Medbh McGuckian, who seems to enjoy being compared to Emily Dickinson (it's the most cryptic Dickinson and the undervalued woman who are symbolically important here). I've criticized McGuckian in these pages before, and I should confess that her new book, *Captain Lavender*, seems more accessible than her last.[7] Frankly, my dislike of her work is less important than her defenses against such objections and what they imply about the state of poetry. I look for accuracy in poetry, memorable speech, something so well or beautifully said that it lifts me to another state of consciousness, but I have difficulty with

[7] CAPTAIN LAVENDER, by *Medbh McGuckian*. Wake Forest University Press. $15.95; $9.95.

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poems that present unnecessary barriers to my comprehension. The new book contains cases in point, like "The Over Mother":

> In the sealed hotel men are handled
> as if they were furniture, and passion
> exhausts itself at the mouth. Play kisses
> stir the circuits of the underloved body
> to an ever-resurrection, a never-had tenderness
> that dies inside me.
>
> My cleverly dead and vertical audience,
> words fly out from your climate of unexpectation
> in leaky, shallowised night letters—
> what you has spoken?
>
> I keep seeing birds
> that could be you when you stretch out
> like a syllable and look to me
> as if I could give you wings.

I'm not sure I can think of a better example of sheer pretentiousness in contemporary poetry. Are we really supposed to guess what "the sealed hotel" means, what kind of "passion / exhausts itself at the mouth," or what "the underloved body" refers to? Are her critics the "cleverly dead and vertical ones" she apparently insults? Why the stretching out "like a syllable" instead of like something else? And if she can't give us wings, even momentary and imaginary ones, why in hell would we want her poetry? What is it for?

Ironically, it's Ní Dhomhnaill who supplies a kind of answer to my questions. She and McGuckian were jointly interviewed in *The Southern Review* (Summer 1995), where Ní Dhomhnaill refers to "the hysteria of what passes for literary criticism in the case of Medbh and me. Our *logos* is based on women's experience, on our lives, rather than on Platonic discourse." So readers like me are charged with upholding a defunct Platonic ideal of poetry; it's the perfect intellectual armor for McGuckian to hide behind, and it doesn't explain why I like McGuckian's translations of Ní Dhomhnaill better than McGuckian's own poems. When critics like Edna Longley praise her for her "teasing subversions, her

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dismantling of hierarchy and authority," my answer is stubbornly simple: why can't she make it all more fun to read? If "she writes a symbolic meta-language with its own emblematic grammar," well, pardon me for choosing to read someone else.

Mind you, I don't believe such literary fights can be easily settled; I'll move on from this one by quoting a stanza from Eilean Ní Chuilleanáin's book, *The Brazen Serpent.*[8] It's from a poem called "The Real Thing," partly about an illuminated manuscript:

> Her history is a blank sheet,
> Her vows a folded paper locked like a well.
> The torn end of the serpent
> Tilts the lace edge of the veil.
> The real thing, the one free foot kicking
> Under the white sheet of history.

Ní Chuilleanáin is a Renaissance scholar at Trinity, and many of her poems deal with evidence of an imperfectly rediscovered past. I find her work a bit more satisfying than McGuckian's simply because her premises are clearer; her ambiguities seem related more to life than to the self-conscious evasions of the poet.

Finally, Seamus Heaney's first collection since winning the Nobel Prize has hardly wanted for reviewers, so I will treat it briefly. Opinions about *The Spirit Level* seem evenly divided.[9] Some see in it symptoms of Heaney's decline into slackness and self-parody, while others find him at the top of his game. I'm inclined to the latter view, though I also think Heaney has been laureled too soon. He holds my interest like few other contemporary poets, and I've shrugged off his weaker poems in order to cherish his best. The Heaney I love is not the self-conscious academic, but the poet whose almost Frostian images of work and play go beyond pastoralism, surprising me with sensations of being in the world as it matters most.

Heaney's opening poem, "The Rain Stick," is a rewarding ruse, full of the sounds of water made by "the fall of grit or dry seeds through a cactus." In other words, it's a poem about poetry, the

[8] THE BRAZEN SERPENT, by *Eilean Ní Chuilleanáin.* Wake Forest University Press. $13.95; $7.95.

[9] THE SPIRIT LEVEL, by *Seamus Heaney.* Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $18.00.

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artificial thing that lets us apprehend the real, or so we hope. "You are like a rich man entering heaven / Through the ear of a raindrop," he concludes. "Listen now again." It's a playful, somewhat rueful beginning to a book that contains some rather dark poems, especially the sequence called "Mycenae Lookout":

> . . . my whole being rained
>
> Down on myself. I saw cities of grass,
> Valleys of longing, tombs, a wind-swept brightness,
> And far-off, in a hilly, ominous place,
>
> Small crowds of people watching as a man
> Jumped a fresh earth-wall and another ran
> Amorously, it seemed, to strike him down.

When at the end of "Weighing In" Heaney writes, "At this stage only foul play cleans the slate," his usual equanimity vanishes, but he is not a poet who can stay angry for long. "Keeping Going," one of the best poems in the new book, contains yet another grisly killing, the dead man "Feeding the gutter with his copious blood," but it ends by honoring Heaney's brother, who has stayed on in the North after Heaney left, and by recalling their childhood play in which a chair served as a rack of bagpipes:

> My dear brother, you have good stamina.
> You stay on where it happens. Your big tractor
> Pulls up at the Diamond, you wave at people,
> You shout and laugh about the revs, you keep
> Old roads open by driving on the new ones.
> You called the piper's sporrans whitewash brushes
> And then dressed up and marched us through the kitchen,
> But you cannot make the dead walk or right wrong.
> I see you at the end of your tether sometimes,
> In the milking parlour, holding yourself up
> Between two cows until your turn goes past,
> Then coming to in the smell of dung again
> And wondering, is this all? As it was
> In the beginning, is now and shall be?

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Then rubbing your eyes and seeing our old brush
Up on the byre door, and keeping going.

This poem is followed by a charming sestina, "Two Lorries," and other poems that make much of his past. I like Heaney's speech-driven meters, at least in the poems where he's in command of them. His success will be held against him, as it always has been, but when I think of my proud Dublin friend saying, "That's the fucker who just won the Nobel Prize," I am sure the Swedish Academy could have done worse.

The choices Irish poets now face are the choices faced by poets everywhere: losing themselves in self-referential games and negligent language or trying to engage the public, once again, in the heightened clarities of memorable speech. The fear of seeming merely traditional has to be cast aside in the making of durable poems. The best poets eventually come to believe in an audience of intelligent listeners, not just in decoding critics. Recently, Irish poets have been lucky in their audiences; one hopes they will continue to honor us with poems worth hearing.

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CAROL IANNONE

Harold Bloom and *King Lear*: Tragic Misreading

More and more professors of literature seem to be troubled by the state of their profession. A group of eminent professors, including Paul Cantor, John Hollander, and Roger Shattuck, recently founded the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics out of "a deep and widespread concern about the present state of literary studies," according to the organization's statement of purpose. The ALSC's emphasis on "broad conceptions of literature rather than the narrow, highly politicized ones often encountered today" stands in implicit opposition to the Modern Language Association and its enthusiastic sponsorship of these very politicized approaches. In addition, no less a critic than Harold Bloom has weighed in with a hefty tome rather combatively (in the present critical context) titled *The Western Canon.* This book is at once a repudiation of the social and political theorists of recent decades, a championing of the idea of literary greatness that these theorists have attacked, and an attempt at construction and defense of the author's own "canon" of great writers.

Coming late to his recognition of the decline in his profession, Bloom asserts that the present is by now "the worst of all times for literary criticism." True aesthetic and literary appreciation has been uprooted by what he calls the School of Resentment—"Feminists, Afrocentrists, Marxists, Foucault-inspired New Historicists, or Deconstructors." In their desire to subjugate literature to their idea of social justice, many of the newer critics, says Bloom, "are destroying all intellectual and aesthetic standards." Departments of literature are losing potential students of high quality, and if literary studies are to survive at all, he argues, it will only be in marginal enclaves while "cultural studies" take center stage.

Contrary to some defenders of the tradition who repudiate the idea of a "canon," Bloom does not shy away from the word or its religious connotations, although he defines it idiosyncratically.

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"The Canon" (his capitalization), Bloom claims, in keeping with his own theoretical preoccupation with literary influence, is the product of a "struggle" carried on "by late-coming authors who feel themselves chosen by particular ancestral figures." Ultimately, the "quest to be canonical" is to defy mortality and "to join communal or societal memory."

Nor does Bloom shrink from setting forth the standards of judgment by which he feels we recognize an author as canonical: "mastery of figurative language, originality, cognitive power, knowledge, exuberance of diction," as well as qualities he names as strangeness, uncanniness, sublimity, incommensurability. He moreover upholds the idea of individual creativity and genius in the face of the newer critics who see the canon as the outgrowth of political power and the product of social forces beyond the individual author.

Bloom has done a service in reviving a sense of aesthetic appreciation, and his effort has been understandably applauded by more traditionally minded critics. While his criticism can be rambling and repetitious, it can also yield nuggets of insight. But in trying to defend the great works from today's moralistic political elites, Bloom succumbs to the opposite fallacy of insisting that literature has no moral significance at all. He argues that literature "will not make one a better or worse person, a more useful or harmful citizen," and asserts that the "silliest way to defend the Western Canon is to insist that it incarnates all of the seven deadly moral virtues that make up our supposed range of normative values and democratic principles."

While few would not sympathize with Bloom's aversion for the simplistic reductionism he has thus described, there is a more expansive moral dimension to literature that must also be restored along with the aesthetic if we are to preserve the significance of great art for our culture and ourselves. Literature may not "save any individual, any more than it will improve our society," but it can make us aware of the moral dimension of our lives, even if only negatively, of the seriousness of our existence, and of the consequences of how we conduct ourselves. Literature works not by precept upon precept, line upon line, but by allowing us to absorb a more expansive articulation of human experience into our own lives, thus deepening the emotional

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reservoir and enhancing the moral imagination to which we have access.

Bloom's central canonical figure is Shakespeare, and a significant part of Shakespeare's greatness for Bloom is that he is possessed of "a spirit that permeates everywhere, that cannot be defined." It is this very spirit that troubles two other of Bloom's canonical figures: Shakespeare's "freedom from doctrine and simplistic morality," says Bloom, "made Dr. Johnson nervous and Tolstoy indignant." By analyzing Bloom's understanding of Shakespeare, as well as his understanding of Johnson's and Tolstoy's reactions to him, especially in regard to *King Lear*, we can delve more deeply into the question of the moral dimension in literature.

Although he does not say so explicitly, Bloom's understanding of Shakespeare is basically an elaboration of Keats's idea of "negative capability": "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without irritable reaching after fact and reason." Keats felt that Shakespeare possessed this quality to a supreme degree. Says Bloom: "Part of the secret of Shakespeare's canonical centrality is in his disinterestedness; despite all the flailings of the New Historicists and other Resenters," whom Bloom sees as trying to "reduce and scatter" the great bard, Shakespeare "has no theology, no metaphysics, no ethics, and rather less political theory than is brought to him by his current critics."

More specifically, Bloom argues that a "sensitive apprehension of *The Tragedy of King Lear* gives us a sense of having been thrown outward and downward until we are left beyond values, altogether bereft." Bloom insists that there "is no transcendence at the end of *King Lear*. . . . The death of Lear is a release for him, but not for the survivors. . . . And it is no release for us either."

Thus Bloom is ironically able to agree with a certain part of Tolstoy's famous, crabby denunciation of Shakespeare, and of *King Lear* in particular, in *What Is Art?* This unintentionally hilarious screed has got to be a textbook example of the wrong kind of criticism to bring to a work of art:

> Lear walks about the heath and says words which are meant to express his despair: he desires that the winds should blow so hard that they (the winds) should crack their cheeks and that the rain should

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> flood everything, that lightning should singe his white head, and the thunder flatten the world and destroy all germs "that make ungrateful man"! The fool keeps uttering still more senseless words. Enter Kent: Lear says that for some reason during this storm all criminals shall be found out and convicted. Kent, still unrecognized by Lear, endeavors to persuade him to take refuge in a hovel. At this point the fool utters a prophecy in no wise related to the situation and they all depart.

A great admirer of Tolstoy's fiction, Bloom not surprisingly thinks that such criticism, which utterly refuses to enter the imaginative life of the play, "is a disaster," but he finds agreeable Tolstoy's judgment that "Shakespeare, as a dramatist, is neither a Christian nor a moralist." For Tolstoy this is a negative of course while for Bloom it is a positive, and he applauds Tolstoy for inadvertently leading us to "the true grounds of Shakespearean power and offense: freedom from moral and religious overdeterminations." Bloom prefers Tolstoy's "revulsion [from *King Lear*] to any attempts to Christianize Shakespeare's deliberately pre-Christian drama."

Negative capability is a superb two-word description of Shakespeare's power, but Bloom surely overstates the case when he asserts that Shakespeare "has no theology, no metaphysics, no ethics." Granted, the sense of desolation is vivid at the end of *Lear*, yet we are far from being "beyond values." To the contrary, "values" have been restored, albeit at the cost of great suffering. After the awful inversions of the first scene, in which we see the evil daughters triumph and the good daughter banished, in which we see lies, deceit, venality, and hypocrisy trumping honesty, goodness, loyalty, and straightforwardness, by the play's end we see truth emerge and order reinstated. We may feel that the debacle could have been prevented, we may believe that the suffering endured by the characters is disproportionate to their deeds, but we cannot claim to be ignorant of how the disaster occurred. We're made to see the destructiveness of unthinking pride and self-regard, and how what may appear to be the comparatively lesser lapses of selfishness, foolishness, and vanity can give rise to murderousness and cruelty, taking the innocent along with the guilty.

Moreover, if one is so disposed, a Christian element can be discerned in *Lear*, in how, for example, the all-forgiving goodness of Cordelia operates as a redemptive force in the play. The feudal

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loyalty of Kent, Gloucester, and the Fool sustain Lear in his extremity, but Cordelia's unconditional love seems to bring forth a kind of spiritual restoration of the tormented king. Too, Lear in a fashion loses his life to save it, and grows in his grief until he is truly "every inch a king," larger than before in sympathy and understanding, in what Bloom might call "cognitive power."[1]

Alfred Harbage's 1958 introduction to the Pelican edition, also included in the 1970 edition, offers some plausible support for a Christian understanding. Among other things he points out that the play

> shows obvious signs of its genesis in a Christian culture. . . . On the human level, the implications of the play are more comforting than the data it abstracts. In our actual world, suffering is not always ennobling, evil is not always self-consuming. In every scene where there is pain, there is someone who strives to relieve that pain. At the close, the merciless have all perished; the last sound we hear is the choral voices of the merciful.

Furthermore, whether *Lear* be specifically Christian in temper or not, the play is imbued with the moral weight of tragedy itself. Harbage marvels in his study of Shakespeare, *As They Liked It: An Essay on Shakespeare and Morality* (1947), that even a "cool and judicious aesthetician" like Benedetto Croce can say, "An infinite

[1] The exquisite scene in which Lear recognizes Cordelia shines with this luminous love, as well as with Lear's poignant newfound humility. Pounded and beaten by his ordeal, Lear is aware of how unjustly he has treated his good daughter and he declares his readiness to be punished:

> Be your tears wet? Yes faith. I pray weep not.
> If you have poison for me, I will drink it.
> I know you do not love me; for your sisters
> Have (as I do remember) done me wrong.
> You have some cause, they have not.

Lear is presuming that if the daughters whom he did not wrong have treated him so badly, what can he expect from the one he did wrong? But Cordelia instantaneously transcends any idea of retribution and says simply and movingly:

> No cause, no cause.

The way her line completes the pentameter of his last line reflects the renewed linkage of their recently ruptured worlds. Thus Lear's next query seems logical: "Am I in France?", France being Cordelia's kingdom. When he is answered by the loyal Earl of Kent, "No, in your own kingdom, sir," it can be seen as a kind of restoration—Lear's return to sanity, to dignity, to fatherhood, and to acknowledgement of his kingship, despite his unwise abdication.

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hatred for deceitful wickedness has inspired this work"; and Harbage ventures in his Pelican introduction that Lear "is religious as all great tragedies are religious." In tragedy, the cosmos is a continuum, sensitive to the doings and disturbances of men, and there are limits at which men learn the truth of their existence. In this regard we think of the words of the Chorus in *Agamemnon*: "God, whose law it is that he who learns must suffer. And even in our sleep pain that cannot forget, falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own despite, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God."[2]

By contrast, Bloom derives his reading from what he calls "nature": "The bewildered old king takes his stand on behalf of nature," Bloom says, adding by way of explanation, "In Lear's sense of nature, Goneril and Regan are unnatural hags, monsters of the deep, and so indeed they are." Bloom's reading rather boxes him in, however, and his view of nature seems restrictive, since it leads him to insist that "If we want a human nature that does not prey upon itself, we turn to the authority of Lear, however flawed, however compromised in its hurtful power." But the phrases "monsters of the deep" and "prey upon itself" are echoes of Albany who as the evil about him intensifies cries out: "If that the heavens do not their visible spirits / Send quickly down to tame these vile offenses, / It will come, / Humanity must perforce prey on itself, / Like monsters of the deep." Since Bloom will not look to Cordelia, or for that matter, to Edgar, if not as "visible spirits" able to "tame" the vileness, at least as figures who bring a transfiguring kind of humanity to the suffering before them, he can see only the shattering desolation of the last scene.

And what of the brutal education Lear has been forced, and has heroically forced himself, to undergo? Bloom elsewhere in his discussion of Shakespeare elevates as crucial the idea of the "introspective consciousness" of the Western Canon, but the growth and expansion in Lear's understanding do not seem to

[2] George Orwell agreed with Tolstoy that Shakespeare is not a Christian writer but disagreed that he is an immoral or amoral one. "His moral code might be different from Tolstoy's," says Orwell, "but he very definitely *has* a moral code, which is apparent all through his work. . . . He was like most Englishmen in having a code of conduct but no world-view, no philosophical faculty." This might be another way of talking about negative capability.

For his part, Croce did feel that Shakespeare's work bore "a strong imprint of Christian ethics."

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register with Bloom. Since in the apparently limited sense of "nature" that Bloom employs, the old king is a "ruined piece of nature" by the play's end, Bloom must of necessity, it would seem, see the whole work as lacking transcendence: "Lear cannot heal us or himself, and he cannot survive Cordelia. . . . Nature as well as the state is wounded almost unto death, and the three surviving characters exit with a dead march."

Ultimately Bloom's view of the play borders on nihilism, or at least solipsism: "What matters most is the mutilation of nature, and our sense of what is or is not natural in our own lives. So overwhelming is the effect at the play's close that everything seems against itself," or as Bloom says elsewhere in his discussion, "beyond poetic justice, beyond good and evil, beyond madness and vanity."

Bloom's attitude amounts to a refusal of tragedy and its implied settlements of the realities with which it deals. He calls himself a student of *gnosis*, which is defined as "a repudiation of known truth," and we might extrapolate to define it in this context as a repudiation of the finally and usually painfully acknowledged limitations and minimal consolations that are the truth of tragedy. Bloom remarks that "Tolstoy demands 'the truth,' and the trouble with Shakespeare, in Tolstoy's perspective, is that he was not interested in the truth." Interestingly, Bloom omits the scare quotes around the second mention of the word in that sentence. Perhaps Shakespeare was not interested in "the truth," in Tolstoy's sense, but the truth in itself is something else again.

Perhaps it is Bloom who is not interested in either "the truth" or the truth. Elsewhere in *The Western Canon*, Bloom tells us that "imaginative literature situates itself somewhere between truth and meaning, somewhere I once compared to what the ancient Gnostics called the *kenoma*, the cosmological emptiness in which we wander and weep, as William Blake wrote." Bloom appreciates literature insofar as he can see it resist meaning in favor of the "uncanny," the "incommensurable" (his frequently used terms for literary greatness), of the non-Socratic Nietzschean experience of ongoing agonistic ecstasy (if that's not an oxymoron). But in order to have this experience he must often rewrite, or "misread" the works before him.

Bloom's reading of Shakespeare seems far more blinkered than Dr. Johnson's, the second of Bloom's canonical figures who

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balked at Shakespeare's relative amoralism. Bloom generally adores Johnson, and quotes approvingly Johnson's assessment of *Lear*:

> The tragedy of Lear is deservedly celebrated among the dramas of Shakespeare. There is perhaps no play which keeps the attention so strongly fixed; which so much agitates our passions and interests our curiosity. The artful involutions of distinct interests, the striking opposition of contrary characters, the sudden changes of fortune, and the quick succession of events, fill the mind with a perpetual tumult of indignation, pity, and hope. . . . So powerful is the current of the poet's imagination, that the mind, which once ventures within it, is hurried irresistibly along.

But of course Bloom rejects as a criticism Johnson's view that Shakespeare "seems to write without moral purpose." Johnson famously approved the altered eighteenth-century version of the play in which Cordelia is allowed to live and prosper; he defends his choice, lamenting that in the original version "Shakespeare has suffered the virtue of Cordelia to perish in a just cause, contrary to the natural ideas of justice, to the hope of the reader, and, what is yet more strange, to the faith of the chronicles." He asserts further that "since all reasonable beings naturally love justice, I cannot easily be persuaded that the observation of justice makes a play worse."

Nevertheless, Johnson is a more expansive critic than such judgments might make him appear to be. What Johnson says about "moral purpose" is that Shakespeare "sacrifices virtue to convenience, and is so much more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose." The "seems" turns out to be important in light of the next sentence in which Johnson goes on to observe of Shakespeare: "From his writings indeed a system of social duty may be selected for he that thinks reasonably must think morally." In other words, for Johnson, morality is a function of truth and by rendering truth, Shakespeare must needs imply a moral dimension. "Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature," Johnson declares with his customary confidence, and his view of "nature" seems quite different from Bloom's, encompassing the totality of human experience:

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> Shakespeare is above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirrour of manners and of life. His characters are . . . the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply, and observation will always find.

Thus even in the case of the death of Cordelia, although Johnson would prefer to see her virtuousness rewarded, he can brook what Shakespeare has done, for "a play in which the wicked prosper, and the virtuous miscarry, may doubtless be good, because it is a just representation of the common events of human life."

More important than an individual call, however, is the larger point that Johnson at least makes clear his perimeters of judgment; he spells out his difficulties with Shakespeare but is able to appreciate his genius despite them. The difference between Johnson and Bloom is that between a critic who has maintained objectivity with reference to reality and a sense of his own preferences, and one whose subjectivity has grown so large that he takes his own failures of perception to be Shakespeare's. More than the neoclassical Johnson, Bloom seems straitjacketed by his time and his Nietzschean outlook, and unaware of how he confuses his own thought with that of the writers he discusses. To illustrate, take this passage of Johnson on Shakespeare that Bloom quotes:

> Though he had so many difficulties to encounter, and so little assistance to surmount them, he has been able to obtain an exact knowledge of many modes of life, and many casts of native dispositions; to vary them with great multiplicity; to mark them by nice distinctions; and to shew them in full view by proper combinations. In this part of his performance he had none to imitate, but has himself been imitated by all succeeding writers; and it may be doubted, whether from all his successors more maxims of theoretical knowledge, or more rules of practical prudence, can be collected, than he alone has given to his country.

In a gloss on this passage, Bloom transforms it into something more peculiar to his own kind of criticism. He begins acceptably:

> "Theoretical knowledge" is what we might call "cognitive awareness"; "practical prudence" is wisdom. If Shakespeare obtained "exact knowledge" and showed it in full view, he is beyond what philosophers could achieve.

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This stretches Johnson a little, but not unacceptably. But then Bloom continues:

> With no inherited contingencies, Shakespeare as originator establishes a contingency that all writers after him must sustain. Johnson realizes, and tells us, that Shakespeare has established the standard for measuring representation ever after. Knowing many modes of life and many casts of native dispositions is not knowing apart from representing.

Now Shakespeare is nudged from being the poet of wisdom and knowledge of life toward the more intraliterary "standard for measuring representation." Bloom continues:

> To vary, mark, and show *is* the knowing, and what is known is what we have learned to call our psychology, of which Shakespeare, as Johnson intimates, is the inventor. If this is holding a mirror up to nature, it is a very active mirror indeed.

Finally then, Shakespeare goes from being Johnson's faithful "mirrour" to being the "inventor" of "our psychology" and by implication selfhood, more in keeping with Bloom's idea of absolute "originality" as a criterion for literary genius.

Bloom's subjectivity is not an irrelevant point. As Peter Shaw writes, "Bloom became notorious some twenty-five years ago by maintaining that all interpretations of written works are misreadings of those works. This claim anticipated deconstruction's contention that we cannot ever truly comprehend any piece of writing." As recently as 1990, for example, Bloom asserted in *The Book of J* that all literary interpretations are "fictions," thus clearing the way for his own irresponsible reading of the J document of the Torah as a quasi-Nietzschean declamation of unfettered existence free of moral impositions. If there is no literary truth, then anything can be said about a work, and indeed anything has. As Shaw concludes, "Bloom . . . helped bring about the canon assault that he now finds distasteful."

For in fact, even before the School of Resentment arose, criticism of Shakespeare was already in trouble. As Richard Levin shows in *New Readings vs. Old Plays: Recent Trends in the Reinterpretation of English Renaissance Drama* (1979), the predecessors of the School of Resentment were earlier critics who, starting about 1950 and accelerating through the 1960s, overrode the older, simpler interpretations of Shakespeare with more and more

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tortured "thematic," "ironic," and "occasionalist" readings. These readings all tended to debunk common sense, traditional values, and the understanding of generations of readers and audiences. It was in this general critical atmosphere that Bloom emerged with his creative misreadings and postmodern resistance to any concept of truth. The battle Bloom is fighting with the School of Resentment is thus a later phase of an earlier battle, one in which he was on the other side.

These later critical developments have to be distinguished from earlier debates in Shakespeare criticism. As Alfred Harbage relates, there have been many disagreements in the history of Shakespeare criticism, including over the nature of the bard's moral sense and over an aesthetically inspired critical "tendency to wrest the plays away from the ordinary reader." After all, Harbage asserts, "It is of the nature of art that it be variously received, and of great art that it mean many things to many men." Harbage insists, however, "There are limits within which sane criticism must reside," and he judges that "All criticism [of Shakespeare] that has had a respectful hearing resides safely within the limits of Shakespeare's meaning." Thus he is able to declare in conclusion,

> The great body of Shakespearean criticism as a whole is a valuable and illuminating product of our culture. It should not in any part be dismissed in a tone of annoyance or contempt. Pre-romantic, romantic, post-romantic—nearly all of it is good in its kind. The critics speak a common language and testify collectively if not individually to the nature of the plays and the nature of human responses.

This was written by a distinguished Harvard professor in 1947. Who could say anything like it today, while critics are busy deconstructing Shakespeare, indicting him for perceived shortcomings in progressive outlook, and manufacturing deliberate misreadings?

Bloom writes in *The Western Canon* that Shakespeare can teach us how to accept death and that the Western Canon can bring one into "confrontation with one's own mortality." But he finds the death of Lear is "no release. . . . Too much has been incarnated in Lear for the manner of his dying to be acceptable to his subjects, and our own investment in Lear's sufferings has become too large for a Freudian 'making friends with death.' "

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Bloom wouldn't be the first critic to balk at the intensified losses of the last scene, but it's usually the death of Cordelia, rather than the death of Lear, that forms the sticking point, the death of the tragic hero himself being almost a convention of the genre. Since we have seen how Bloom deliberately resists the redemptive or compensatory elements of the play (Cordelia, Edgar, Lear's own growth toward wisdom), we might conclude that his resistance to tragic closure arises out of his resistance to death itself.

The tragic trajectory constitutes a movement out from self-involvement toward self-transcendence, and involves a surrender of one's life or of one's previous sense of life. If some people want tragedy without suffering, Bloom seems to want suffering without tragedy, that is, without the catharsis, without the release, without the surrender, because that would end the ongoing agonistic struggle, the incommensurable *gnosis* that is for him the essential literary experience and the seal of existence. Bloom prefers the suffering self, rather than the surrender of self which signifies the tragic acceptance of limits. Thus while Bloom's adversaries in the School of Resentment rail against patriarchy, elitism, sexism, heterosexism, racism, and other kinds of hierarchies they see as artificially imposed limits in literature, Bloom's resentment rises to the ultimate limitation, death. While such resistance is certainly understandable, the resistance to the specific address the tragic form makes to such resentment seems less so.

The fact is that while Bloom tries to uphold the Western Canon, his own idiosyncratic modes of reading can only add to its general diminishment because he cuts off the works from the implications they carry for common life and locks them into his own tortured subjectivity. Bloom argues that in order to read great works we must be willing to surrender simple pleasures for complex ones, but once we have done that, we may need to return again to the simple: the simple connections, the simple truths, the simple pleasures of literature. Or as Dr. Johnson says, and Bloom quotes: " 'The irregular combinations of fanciful invention may delight a-while, by that novelty of which the common satiety of life sends us all in quest; but the pleasures of sudden wonder are soon exhausted, and the mind can only repose on the stability of truth.' "

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ROBERT BLY

The Scandal

Among the bindlestiffs there was gaiety the day
After the minister ran off with the choir director.
Spike-pitchers threw their bundles higher on the load
And the thresher boss put out an extra case of beer.

Actually the minister's wife felt relieved that morning,
Though afraid too. She walked out by the slough,
And admired the beaver's house, partly above
Water, partly beneath. That seemed right.

The preacher felt dizzy—so much sound flowed in
From country music mixed with the Song
Of Songs. The lovers drove for hours in a small
Car, and stayed in a motel near Bismarck.

And the choir director? She knew the whole town
Would hate her. She looked out at the flowing river
From the motel window. She saw the teal climbing,
And thought of her father angry at the world.

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What Bill Stafford Was Like

With small steps he climbed very high mountains
And offered distinctions to persuasive storms,
Delicacies at the edge of something larger,
A comfort in walking on ground close to water.

Something large, but it wasn't an animal snorting
In a cave, more like the rustling of a thousand
Small-winged birds, all together, comfortable,
In a field, feeding. One felt at home nearby.

There are many possible ways to see the world
(To whom we should be fair). When someone
Spoke, his face thought, and his eyebrow
Said it. The words weren't always comforting,

But calculated to nudge us along to that place
—Just over there—where we would be safe for the night.

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PATTIANN ROGERS

Before the Beginning: Maybe God and a Silk Flower Concubine Perhaps

The white sky is exactly the same white
stone as the white marble of the transparent
earth, and the moon with its clear white
swallow makes of its belly of rock neither
absence nor presence.

The stars are not syllables yet enunciated
by his potential white tongue, its vestigial
lick a line that might break eventually,
a horizon curving enough to pronounce
at last, *my love.*

The locked and frigid porcelain barrens
and hollows of the descending black plain
are a pattern of gardens only to any single
blind eye blinking, just as a possible stroke
of worm, deaf with whiteness, might hear
a lace bud of silk meridians spinning
and unraveling simultaneously on the vacuous
beds of the placeless firmament.

An atheist might believe in the seductive
motion turning beneath the transparent gown
covering invisibly the non-existent bones
and petals of no other. Thus the holy blossom,
spread like the snow impression of a missing
angel, doubts the deep-looped vacancy
of her own being into which god, in creation,
must assuredly come.

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Is it possible there might be silver seeds
placed deep between those legs opening
like a parting of fog to reveal the plunging salt
of a frothy sea? But god digresses, dreaming
himself a ghost, with neither clamor nor ecstasy,
into inertia, his name being farther
than ever from time.

Static on the unendurably boring white
sheet of his own plane, he must think hard
toward that focus of conception when he can rise
shuddering, descending and erupting into the beauty
and fragrance of their own making together—
those flowering orange-scarlet layers and sun-
shocking blue heavens of, suddenly, one another.

Come, Drink Here

Drink from this circle of night right here,
blind and sudden with currents and waves
like the wellside of the moon.

Put your mouth here where I'm showing you,
against this darkness as full of the taste
of sky as snow water caught early
in clean cave rock.

Easy between your lips again and again,
roll this slight berry possessing
the texture of violet at the root,
having the nature of a solid grain
of clear, flowing river.

Swallow at this narrow crevassing
shadow of faint salt whose ending can never
be savored or known. Tongue this tight,

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gathered petal and that other small winding
of rose too, with its glassy sap.

Lick here, round and round this warm
nub, a taste a little like butter and sea,
a little like liquid sun left
on dense green mosses after dusk.

Close your eyes, and where I'm placing
your finger, here at this single flume,
like a funnel of iris leaf lithe
and rolled at the stem, suck
morning.

At this swelling, from this soft
cistern, from this heated damp like wet
day on summer grasses, drink first.

Then answer me.

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ROBIN S. CHAPMAN

The Harp Seal

for B.R. & J.W.

Morning, and in the gray Newfoundland light
The boy walked the beach to see
What the shift in the winter wind had brought—
Low on the sea the sun shone through
A city of ice, blown to shore in the night,
Piled in glittering green-white shapes
That rose and fell, advanced, receded,

So that the harp seal,
Stretched high on a floe, nose turned to the sun
In the boom and thud of the running tide,
Seemed another fantasy, something he'd sung
Or dreamed, his other self called up from the watery world,
The two of them makers of the city of light.
And so for a time he watched, and something sang
In his blood as the seal sang to the sea.

And then the sound of trucks and guns and the men from town
Gathered to see who was shooting at what and the seal
Turned, stretched, and settled to bask in the sun;
One of the men with a steadier hand aimed and shot
And red blood spread as the seal slipped under the water.
All afternoon they dragged boats out to probe for meat
That would liven another week, if they didn't get crushed
Or frozen; and the boy turned his back on the beach, and the men
Of his town, and walked home the slow, divided way.

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COLETTE INEZ

Oxford Meeting

Lodging house,
fringed lamps
in the foyer.
I say who I am.
She motions me upstairs.
Rumpled hose, elbows
poking through holes
of a potato-colored
cardigan, astonishment
drawn in lines
at her mouth.
Curved like mine
her hips shift weight
on an opposite chair.
I look for a sign
she has looked for me—
letters returned
addressee unknown.
A photograph.
The wall clock
hatches an hour.
Streaked white mane,
disheveled at the neck,
this woman
was the furtive girl
fingering her rosary,
buttons strained
when she took
the train north
to place me in a cradle
strangers might rock.
Now she communes

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with a spirit
just past my gaze.
"You may write to me,
not saying who we are,"
she sees me to the door.
Pallid roses of snow
fall as I leave.
I hunger for the color
of fire, orange balloons
floating through ashes.

The Telling

They sit in the refectory
by the closed kitchen door.
October rain blurs the tall windows.
They have met here before to part with secrets.

Morning light brushes gray on bare walls,
fingers his carrot-colored hair.
A wedge of lines deepens between her gold eyes.
She peers at the swelling

under her coat, forms a steeple with her hands,
daydreams holy water blessing the baby's face,
a saint's name for the christening.
He tugs at his collar and blinks.

Pots and pans clattering in the kitchen tell them
they're no longer alone.
Her fingers tense as he skims them with his lips.
They leave by different doors.

Inside her body, a fury of division seizes
attributes from each: yellow-brown eyes,
a fringe of auburn curls
bloom into the parcel delivered to the Sisters.

Late June—a whiff of incense and convent roses
in my bassinet.

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FLOYD SKLOOT

Frogs Returning Moon

The creek is running wild with April rain
this morning. It tumbles down the hillside
and rushes under our bedroom windows,
humbling the dark-eyed junco's rolling trill.
Bees work the hyssop at our windowsill,
its scent mixed with the rosemary and chives.
A Wilson's warbler flashes past, belly
like a glimpse of sun. Here and there a few
late daffodils and irises remain,
and the last lilacs are lavender-blue,
but all around a bold palette of new
life is taking over their fading lights.

It is not enough to sit in bed, rapt
but apart; after a six-month relapse
I am ready for a long walk outside.
The Douglas fir is tipped with pale green shoots
and even last year's failed azalea thrives.
Soon there will be marigolds and cosmos
in bloom, bleeding heart, a spread of seathrift,
and down the slope a shock of wild wood rose.
It is the month of Frogs Returning Moon,
spider eggs in gaps between steps, a nest
of mice in oak logs. Nothing is at rest.
The coyotes' howl fills the dwindling nights.

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Hop Fields in Winter

By midsummer, twining hop vines will hide
these wires in a mob of bracts and flowers
that seem to mass in a matter of hours,
filling the dense air with a scent like pine.
But now, strung like harps, the fields sing in winds
raging downvalley. We watch as they pass
over the skin of the swollen river
and leave the impression that nothing lasts.

Brackish water ripples over the banks.
Wind tears into a stand of second growth
oak. In a moment, snow begins, thick flakes
in their smooth quadrille reminding us both
of cherry blossoms in late April let
loose in one great squall. I believe you are
thinking of spring planting as you look west
where the road bends and see the Coast Range clear.

We can feel the air warming. Where the storm
has been, morning light drenches the snowpack
before creeping toward us, nudging the dark
away. The wires wink, shiver, but hold firm.

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BRIAN COX

Musée d'Orsay

In a converted railway hall
three floors of escalators climb
to Monet, Gauguin and van Gogh.
Opposite my chin, riding the steps,

a hawk-nosed woman past her prime
—tight, short skirt, multi-coloured blouse,
heels so high I think of Eiffel towers—
dresses like a maypole sheath.

As we slowly rise in line she
kisses her bald swain on the lips,
slips her tongue between his teeth.
Forced to goggle from underneath,

we're an old couple in flat-soled shoes,
comely vestments for Paris walks,
wondering if we're meant to watch
these ostentatious bills and coos.

We find the galleries ablaze,
van Gogh's swirling greens, angry blues,
rich colour burning in our eyes.
I stand near the maypole to see

Gauguin's child bride nude on her bed,
his rage against propriety.
If we all jettisoned restraint
would we unlock an earthly paradise?

His picture lives within its frame and style;
our passion thrives on privacy,
a force so rare it might be shown in paint,
but not by gestures in a public hall.

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JOHN DREXEL

The Arrival

At dawn, after travelling all night
through a country we had been told was hostile,

we caught a glimpse of what seemed a castle
in the far distance, almost rising from the ocean

like some solid shimmering chimera on the horizon,
like something drawing us onward in a fairy tale.

Were the natives friendly? We peered out the window in the pale
half-light of early morning. The view kept changing. Passengers

stirred in the corridor, speaking in foreign tongues. How far
had we travelled since midnight, and in what direction?

This much was clear: We had left behind the cities of the plain
with their factories belching smoke and crumbling high-rises

where what went on behind closed doors (commotion and
  cries and silences)
would have driven even an omnipotent dictator to despair.

How far had we travelled, how far come? How far? How far?
Where had we arrived? We disembarked in unfamiliar light.

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RUTH FAINLIGHT

Woodman

You cut some branches, also a bough
from the tree outside my room
to widen the view and let
me see as far as the vineyards,
but a stiff and sullen mood
would not allow one word
of thanks or pleasure.

Something is wrong with my eyes—
they only recognise the past,
with my heart—it only beats
nostalgia or remorse,
with my mind—which cannot learn
until too late, too late,
only values what is lost.

Afterwards, I could look
across the vines to the lone tree
not quite at the top of the hill
and the square Saracen tower
the village doctor was rebuilding—
none of which had been visible
before you played the woodman.

Woodman, will you trim the lilac,
the hawthorn and the hazel
in another garden,
reveal the line of hills
behind another house? Now
I know how little time is left
to prove I'm grateful.

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BERT CARDULLO

Road Fever

THE "YOUTH FILM" IS STILL WITH US, though I am no longer young. Ever since *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) and *Easy Rider* (1969), even before them in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), the subject of such movies has been sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll in combination with youthful alienation or its opposite number, adolescent exhilaration. Rarely have these films treated larger subjects, by which I mean subjects that concern something other than one's own material or social well-being: spiritual or metaphysical matters, if you will. Given its realistic-cum-action bias, the cinema may appear to be the last place in which to treat mystical or ontological themes; but oddly enough, with its omniscient and unseen, indeed alternately ethereal and confessional camera, film begs to do something other than record the natural world in every detail and human activity in all its earthly concentration. A recent youth film does precisely something else: it summons up the bracingly spiritual. Not, however, without adding a measure of humor that is whimsical to the point of being surreal.

Cold Fever is, of all things, an Icelandic "road" movie that features a Japanese as its central character, is spoken mostly in English, and has an American co-author: Jim Stark, who collaborated on the screenplay with the director, Fridrik Thor Fridriksson. The film opens in winter in a crowded, dreary, cramped Japanese city, where we see people scuttling off to work in the morning. One of the men taking the subway is Atsushi Hirata, a junior executive who looks forward to a hard-earned golfing vacation in Hawaii—that is, until his grandfather browbeats him into traveling instead to Iceland. Hirata's mother and father had died there in an accident seven years before, and the old man wants his grandson to go at last to the river where they drowned to perform a religious ritual that will ensure the repose of his parents' souls. Hirata regards this ceremony as mere superstition, as does his boss, who nonetheless agrees to let his employee go to Iceland for twenty-one days in exchange for the latter's weekly tee-off time at their favorite local golf course. Indeed, it is the accidental—as well as eerily comic—interruption of Hirata's residential putting practice by a videotaped greeting his parents had once sent from Scandinavia that finally impels the negligent son to abandon his tiny urban apartment for the frozen expanses of northernmost Europe.

Upon arrival in the Icelandic capital of Reykjavík, Hirata has his first humorous (but simultaneously pointed) misadventure when he boards a tour bus full of Germans rather than the bus that would have taken

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him to Skagaströnd, where his parents perished. What he sees during this brief excursion is almost enough by itself to convince him of the existence of a preternatural realm: a volcanic, snow-encrusted landscape dotted with rivers, lakes, mountains, waterfalls, glaciers, and thermal springs, among the last of which can be found numerous gushers or geysers that intermittently shoot up jets of hot water into the frosty air. This collision of extremes creates gigantic steam clouds that hover inches above the icy, craggy earth, creating the illusion that, if the sky has not fallen, then it is at least closer to the ground than scientists had led us to believe. According to the tour guide, the Icelandic people are superstitious types who believe in ghosts, and it is no wonder given the hallucinatory beauty of their seemingly science-fictional homeland. For the moment, however, Hirata would rather trust in hard technology, so he uses a cellular phone to call a taxi that will take him back to Reykjavík.

The cab driver immediately proceeds to regale the by now numb Japanese with peculiar facts and wishful opinions about women and sheep. As his passenger sullenly smokes in the backseat, the cabbie then abruptly excuses himself for what appears to be a bathroom-break at an isolated farm. When he doesn't return after some time, the exasperated Hirata trudges through swirling snow and howling wind to peek inside what he thought was an outhouse. What he beholds is no toilet but instead a Nativity pageant or baptismal ceremony, officiated by the driver and replete with seraphically-clad countryfolk singing to the tune of golden trumpets amidst a flock of sheep. After this revelation, Hirata doggedly departs on foot with his luggage, and as he does so the screen appropriately dissolves to blinding white for the first of several times in *Cold Fever.*

He thumbs a ride back to the capital in a truck, but in this film, in this country, in this climate, it has to be a vehicle with an open body and the Japanese must stand in the back with a group of lustily singing workingmen, one of whom asks him a question that recurs like a leitmotif in Fredriksson and Stark's screenplay: "How do you like Iceland?" Hirata finds the country very strange, thank you, as strange as Buster Keaton finds the world in which he is perpetually trying to find his place. The reference to Keaton here is not farfetched, for Masatoshi Nagase, who plays this young Japanese businessman, reacts to the weirdness of Iceland's world with Buster's stoicism, even if he neither suggests the vast range of emotion that could paradoxically be conveyed by the "great stone face," nor uses his body with the expressive athleticism of the esteemed silent comedian. Nagase is, however, part of a movie that, like Keaton's work, finds surreal elements in real life and the human imagination; though, unlike Keaton, it uses the surreal or the dreamlike less to comment on the process of film editing and thus the nature of film itself, than to point to an otherworldly presence in or effect on human affairs.

Back in Reykjavík, Hirata buys a car for his trip to Skagaströnd: a used

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Citröen, from a woman who claims that she has been psychically drawn to the Japanese. Perhaps, but the automobile she sells him has a heater that doesn't work, no spare tire, and a radio that is permanently stuck on a ridiculously raucous Reykjavík rock station. The Citröen does come equipped, however, with gas springs, which, upon ignition, propel the car up out of its crouch and into driving position, and thus magically appear to give the vehicle a decrepit life of its own. So off Hirata goes into the original winter wonderland. Predictably, he has a flat in the middle of nowhere and is neither prepared nor dressed for the occasion. Unpredictably, he finds a house in the distance, where he not only gets help from a taciturn elderly couple but is also served a meal—of sheep's brains.

On the road again to Skagaströnd, the Japanese next encounters, as part of his combination serendipitous, sentimental, and supersensory education, an American (the first of three he will meet during his journey) at a gas station. Her name is Laura, she hitches a ride with him, and she describes herself as a "funeral collector" who goes all over the globe to photograph as well as tape-record death ceremonies. Laura doesn't explain why she does this, but one can certainly guess why her "hobby," as she calls it, is portrayed in this film: for it is a kind of demystification or demarcation of death that seems to rob dying of its terror. To be sure, what Laura does is also so odd as to be funny, especially when she insists on photographing Hirata with the coffin of a stranger at a roadside cemetery. But we know that Hirata seriously needs this encounter with death, since earlier in Reykjavík, before he had met Laura, we found him voluntarily attending the burial of yet another stranger. In this way death becomes another part of life for him, which is to say that it takes on an existence of its own, or rather that those who have died assume lives of their own: invisible yet nonetheless actual, intangible but still divinable, infinite and eternal at the same time as they are part of the here-and-now.

With comic appropriateness, Laura the photographer hitchhikes a ride back to Reykjavík with one of the mourners from the funeral party, while the Japanese is left to drive on alone. What he experiences next could be described as *Cold Fever*'s turning point. Despite the fact that he has a map, Hirata makes a wrong turn at a sign ominously asking, "Does anyone know you are going this way?" It is here that his car breaks down, and it is in this absolutely deserted tundra that he nearly freezes to death as well. After perilously falling asleep, however, he wakes up to find a female ghost immediately outside the Citröen. She says nothing to the Japanese, barely even looking at him; instead she simply begins screaming loudly and eerily, with the result that ice shatters, pools of water seem to detonate, and the dead engine of Hirata's automobile spontaneously starts, sending him merrily on his way out of this frostbitten crucible.

Or was it all, at least the spectral part, just a dream? It doesn't really matter, because even if the apparition, her screaming, and nature's

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"awakening" were only creations of the sleeping Japanese's cold-fevered mind, their effect, or the effect of his mental energy, was to ignite the pistons of the slumbering Citröen. In any event, something miraculous has occurred, and it has occurred without the display of spectacle for its own sake. Furthermore, the appearance of the ghost is not a visual trick designed to prove, or at least to insinuate, the existence of ghosts to nonbelievers. Rather, such a manifestation is intended to show us how close Hirata came to dying—how close he came to experiencing death, or entering the realm of the spirit, while paradoxically still remaining alive—as well as to adumbrate the influence his near-death experience will have on the rest of his life, i.e., on his regard for what he was already coming to believe are the *living* dead.

The Japanese almost has another near-death experience when he picks up two American hitchhikers, incongruously named Jack and Jill. These two are initially a contrastive comedy team who sometimes communicate with each other by way of hand puppets and otherwise constantly bicker; the kinetic Jack sports a New York Yankees cap as part of his earthy attire, while the whiny Jill wears wraithlike make-up that marks her as a city girl-gone-grunge. Hirata doesn't know what to make of his passengers until the Citröen stops at a convenience store because Jill is hungry, and, off-screen, Jack commits a burglary during which shots are fired. Shortly thereafter, he evicts the newly enlightened Japanese from the car at gunpoint and drives off with his woman, never to be seen again.

Who are these two characters, and what are they doing in this film? Clearly, Jack and Jill are a contemporary Bonnie and Clyde transported from the American scene to a rural landscape in Scandinavia. It is, in other words, as if they have descended on *Cold Fever* from another world, and in a sense they have: from the world of that prototypical capitalist, the ruthless gangster, whose concerns are materialistic or earthly in the extreme—money, cars, clothes, sex, *things*. When Jack and Jill throw Hirata out of the Citröen, they expel him from their violently competitive world and, to a certain extent, from the godless, possession-oriented world to which he used to belong back in Japan. This time, the Japanese just keeps walking down the long, lonesome road, his suitcase in hand, until he reaches a little snowbound hotel that appears to have been plucked right from a genre painting of rustic life. The employees as well as the guests of this place dress, not as urban gangsters, but rather as American cowboys, and the hotel bar features live country music instead of hard rock.

The cowboy-country theme is no accident, since it is associated with Westerns, and this group of American movies is naturally populated by the Westerner—an archetypal character who is very different from the gangster, and whose image embodies the epiphany toward which Hirata is moving. For the Westerner is a man of repose, not, like the gangster, a creature of unceasing and nervous activity; he is also a figure of relative leisure in an open or expansive universe, the exact opposite of the

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ambitious, entrepreneurial gangster in the closed, largely indoor world of the city. Most important for the Japanese in *Cold Fever*, the lone Westerner seeks not to extend his dominion, like a mobster, but rather to comport himself with honor in a world that is figuratively constricted by the pressures of obligation. Hirata increasingly feels the pressure of obligation toward his parents, for whom, as he himself says, he did nothing while they were alive. And he obligingly follows the example of the "Westerners" he encounters in frontier Iceland, particularly that of Siggi, an aging guide whom he finds, or rather who finds him, at the hotel saloon. There they guzzle the potent national drink called "Black Death" and eat ram testicles as well as sheeps' heads; there also Siggi tells the Japanese that, although the road to Skagaströnd is closed until spring, he knows a way to the river where the spirits of Hirata's late mother and father await their son's ministrations.

Although suffering from hangovers, the two men leave early the next morning by jeep, then switch to Icelandic ponies when the terrain becomes too rugged and the snowdrifts too deep. Who loaned them the animals, as well as who permitted them to stay overnight in a cabin along the way, is not explained, nor need it be in a film where serendipitous—not to say heaven-sent—occurrences play such a large role. As Siggi himself proclaims, "Just stupid people believe only in things or powers they can see and touch." Siggi and Hirata continue to imbibe Black Death even as they seem both ritualistically to cleanse themselves and religiously to exorcise the sub-zero temperature by bathing in a hot spring. As the travelers sleep after their second evening of drink, the Japanese suddenly awakens and goes out unprotected into the freezing cold. Beneath a full moon and surrounded by swirling mist, he walks toward us while a number of ghostly figures in white, superimposed on his own image, walk away from the camera. In other words, the two realms, terrestrial and ethereal, seem to merge with or pass through each other here. Hirata may be dreaming but, once again, it doesn't matter. For the point is that he has had his mental faculties expanded to such an extent that supernatural contact not only doesn't trouble him, it also seems quite plausible to his conscious as well as unconscious mind and even integral to earthly life.

His raised consciousness is confirmed the next morning when, upon awakening, the Japanese remains undeterred as Siggi, who says he has had a forbidding dream, tells his companion that he must go on alone across the treacherous bridge leading to the river where his parents drowned. The wise elder momentarily appears to have lost faith, that is, whereas the youthful initiate now believes in his mission more than ever. Alone he goes without hesitation, looking back only to wave goodbye to his waiting friend and, significantly, never looking down as he delicately picks his way across the skimpily constructed, and therefore airier-than-usual, bridge. Soon he comes to the river of no return for his mother and father, where he dutifully as well as desirously performs the holy rite that will grant eternal peace to their spirits. At sunset, with tears in his

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eyes and prayers on his lips, with feeling in his heart and veneration in his soul, the Japanese completes the ritual by tossing flowers into the river; lighting two candles that he then places on small ice floes, which he releases into the water; and by pouring a bottle of sake into the current.

As Hirata and Siggi, photographed in extreme long shot, now begin the long journey back by pony, we unfortunately get *Cold Fever*'s only false note. In voice-over, the protagonist speaks the following superfluous words from a letter home to his grandfather: "Sometimes a journey can take you to a place that can't be found on a map." We knew or had concluded this already from Hirata's previous, alternately bizarre and mystical experiences on this Scandinavian isle. And therefore the Japanese's verbalizing of his perception or revelation, the culmination of his spiritual journey, robs us of our share in what should have been a quiet moment. It also clashes with his normally laconic persona and adds a layer of sentiment to Fredriksson's film that it cannot bear.

This movie is, after all, a rather quirky comedy, and as such it need only end in character—with Hirata's silent, soulful rebirth dead in the middle of winter. The wintry setting means, of course, that the dominant color in the cinematographer Ari Kristinsson's palette is white. But this virtual *lack* of color is entirely fitting for the purification-purgation that Hirata undergoes in the course of *Cold Fever*, as well as appositely antithetical to the dirty yellows, blues, and greens of the opening scenes in citified Japan. Equally suitable, in a film that, as something of a travelogue for the rest of the world, has a "descriptive" together with a narrative function, is Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson's accompanying music, which manages to combine the two functions into one with its austere yet majestic, quiescent but nonetheless searching, tones.

Cold Fever is only eighty-two minutes long, although it seems longer (but no less trenchant) because of its relatively slow or leisurely pace. A music video this film is not, either in narrative duration, cinematic style, or musical selection. *Cold Fever* does incorporate videotape, however: as described earlier, it is a taped message from Hirata's now deceased mother and father, played back on his cassette recorder when one of his golf balls accidentally activates the machine, that provides the final impetus for the young Japanese's ceremonial trip to Iceland to honor his parents' memory. And in making that trip, or taking the road to religious epiphany and spiritual imperishability, Hirata identifies himself with—indeed, expands his *pneuma* into—the boundless, timeless, at times impalpable world of saint cinema. Clearly, what he leaves behind in the process, or refuses to restrict his corpus to, are not only the narrow streets, stuffy interiors, and straitened career paths of profanely urban Japan, but also the spatial and temporal confines of the fiendishly visible, proximately video here-and-now.

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JOHN LOUGHERY

Bits and Pieces

THERE ISN'T MUCH THAT IS OSTENSIBLY EASIER, but in reality more difficult, than to create meaningful art out of allusions and fragments. Discontinuity or disintegration is a standard theme today but, as a style, remains a good deal trickier. When I was in college in the 1970s, *The Waste Land* was still taken as the final word in great poetry and sincere skeptics were put in their place, but I wonder if Eliot's star shines quite as brightly with today's literary undergraduates. Some of the cut-and-paste novels of John Hawkes skate close to the edge, and the mishmash paintings of David Salle always intend more than they achieve. Ultimately the problem would seem to be that art—even an art based on dissatisfaction with the idea of wholeness, at odds with any vision of a stable world—functions best when it implies an underlying control and purpose on the part of the creator. The world according to Samuel Beckett is a hellishly uncertain realm, but the theater of Samuel Beckett is all of a piece. John Cage's philosophy might drive one crazy, but his art-making didn't flail about in the face of all that ghastly random chance. He was, so to speak, in control of relinquishing his control in the face of the often uncontrollable.

"Jasper Johns: A Retrospective" at the Museum of Modern Art was meant to honor, in the usual mindless way of retrospectives of living artists, a forty-year career. The exhibition was really about the failure of a certain artistic path, a story of a very interesting beginning, a still-promising middle, and a sadly nervous, quirky, enfeebled end. Actually, the real beginning of the Johns story will never be known; the artist destroyed all of his pre-1954 work, and so this sizeable show began with the much-reproduced flag, target, and number paintings. A deadpan sort of guy in his twenties, Johns was interested in fashioning a response to a society that was busily remaking itself into a visual rather than a print-oriented culture, but which, despite all those hours spent staring at tubes, screens, ads, and logos, actually *saw* very little. Yet it was necessary for Johns to express this thought without emotion, rhetoric, or earnestness. The repainted targets were clever in this regard (though the four heads without eyes in the most famous one of the series betray a touch of the didactic), but the flags were perfect. An icon invoked with numbing regularity in the peak years of the Cold War became in Johns's hands the most artificial, painstakingly constructed object—time-bound (bits of newsprint peaking through like pentimento), layered (the paint on the fabric, which is mounted on wood), frazzled (the clumps of

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encaustic), and yet still confusingly potent. The paintings of maps from the early 1960s, in which the phony order imposed on the earth by manmade lines and names is willy-nilly slapped about by energetic jabs of color, have a similar droll purposefulness to them.

Pretensions of any kind—to deep meaning, order, regularity, melodrama, personal ego, or even heights of ambition—seem to have been Johns's *bête noire*, at least in this period. As such, there has always been an aspect of his art that registers as a rebuke to the high-flown style of his immediate predecessors in the art world, the Abstract Expressionists. In his capacity as tongue-in-cheek satirist, Johns is at his most appealing. *Painting with Two Balls* (1960)—with its seemingly random thrusts of paint, a groaning wedge between the two attached canvases, and two balls balanced in the opening—doesn't amount to much if it's only to be read as Example #2,000 of fracturing the integrity of the picture plane. But as a parody of the grandiose intentions of Pollock and Kline (the reigning gods when Johns arrived on the scene), it's close to hilarious. The all-important brushstrokes are niggardly and fastidious rather than magisterial and profound, squeaks and chirps more than deep chords. Those two petite paint-splattered balls are an affront to the swagger of Action Painting and the boys with the big ones. A final indignity to the purity of the "field": the title of the painting is writ across the bottom. Good, old-fashioned sass.

Alas, though, there is a world of difference between knowing what you *don't* believe in, or don't want to join in making, and what you *do* want to study, propose, celebrate, affirm, and create. And from the middle of the show at MoMA to its end in the basement galleries, it was hard to avoid the sense of a man who never quite made the leap from the one point to the other. *According to What* (1964) proves that a lively painting can be made out of nothing more than self-consciousness about the act of picture-making itself and a disdain for focus (though that's not exactly an idea for the ages), and in a painting like *Periscope* (1963), alluding to the drowning death of Hart Crane, there is even a touch of deftly restrained emotion. But too many of the other works from the sixties read today like an unending apprenticeship to Marcel Duchamp, in just the way so much of American Cubism from the 1920s looks like nothing more than a footnote to Picasso and Braque. Nifty brooms and all, it is difficult to fathom the excitement they inspired when they were first exhibited—until one ponders that towering shadow of Duchamp and the position he left art-buyers and artists in thirty years ago. Duchamp's response to the conviction that an impasse had been reached with object-making and object-deification, with traditional aesthetics and the aura of originality, was to stop making things acquisitive people could purchase for living-room or museum walls. What to do if you share Duchamp's philosophy in large measure but don't want to spend your days playing chess and smiling enigmatically? That anxious quest, when you doubt both the value of fine art and yourself as a creator, will take you in many directions, and perhaps in the

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end there is something nakedly honest (and hence admirable?) about the search. After all, we do like that element of Pollock: "But is it a *painting*?" he would demand of Lee Krasner, unclear about where his own restlessness was taking him.

Yet Pollock was truly moving in a new direction, whatever one finally thinks of the result. The proof that Johns was often flailing about (albeit in an exuberant way at the start, waging war on the canvas) hit us at MoMA with the crosshatch paintings of the 1970s, which *en masse* look dumb rather than mute, and with the densely allusive, hodgepodge works of the 1980s and 1990s. Granted, Picasso and numerous other artists "re-did" Old Masters time and again, but for purposes that could be eulogistic or rebellious. Johns's thin references to Picasso and Cézanne or the details borrowed from Grünewald or *trompe l'oeil*, however, have nothing to do with those bolder intentions. They bespeak the opposite of boldness: ennui. "Dreamlike in the variety of their floating juxtapositions" is one way to see them (to use Kurt Varnedoe's phrase). Dazed and uncertain, is another. The impoverishment of modern art, its nervous lack of authority, is a valid subject to explore, but this show presented, at least in its second half, an unfortunate victim rather than an analyst of that situation. There is a point at which (as Beckett and Duchamp knew) silence carries a greater weight.

The Ellsworth Kelly retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum this winter touched on some of these same issues, though the results of Kelly's quest are very different—both more truncated and more sensuous. This artist's monochromatic shaped panels are often spoken of as an investigation of the points at which nature and abstraction overlap (by way of Arp, Matisse, Cycladic sculpture, and a few other key influences), and that is certainly the case in the works of the 1980s and 1990s, which the exhibition amply displayed. The soft roll of a hill, a horizon line, the tilt of a roof—those fragments of "real life," bits and pieces of visual experience that often stop us in our tracks, are a common starting point for Kelly. A wall of his own photographs in the show emphasized that interest in the pared-down, the evanescent, the architectural. Like Johns, his contemporary, Kelly took the sweat and drama of Abstract Expressionism as an anti-model. But with Kelly, that reactive principle evolved along the lines of "better to be thought narrow and mannered than loud and pretentious." Yet, in the long run, Kelly has plenty of pretensions, as all worthwhile artists must, and it took a full-scale exhibition of 250 works in a space as strangely agreeable to non-rectangular art as the Guggenheim for those ambitions to look and feel right.

The ambitiousness of Kelly's art, for this viewer, has to do with the failure of his paintings to mean much, and their failure to invite prolonged study or repeated viewing, *as single entities* or in traditional multifaceted contexts. A paradoxical ambitiousness, to be sure. But consider the experience of rounding the corner into the gallery in which his two paintings hang in the twentieth-century rooms at the Met.

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They are stuck there, through no one's fault but their own, like textbook illustrations of a certain premise or period in recent art history, and (year after year) almost everyone nods and hurries by to look at the livelier Pollock or Joan Mitchell to one side or the Lucian Freud or James Rosenquist on the other. It isn't Clyfford Still who needs his own little room at the Met; Kelly's monochromes or even the polychromes are what don't "work" in pairs or in the company of other styles of art. They become sullen or inert. They announce the defeat of painting as a great, expressive medium.

The end gallery at the top of the Guggenheim spiral, on the other hand, conveyed Kelly's ability to make his more irregularly shaped canvases bounce and hum, animating the entire room, though the impact—so large an area of orange or yellow-green or lemon-yellow in a white, brightly lighted room with twenty-foot ceilings—was also dizzying, even panic-inducing. Calm and contained, this room was not. Lumpish, these paintings were not. If the enveloping white space, broken by what are almost "cut-outs" of color, did indeed make the entire gallery feel like one giant collage, where were we, the viewers, in all this? Appropriately and cleverly subsumed. The individual paintings might not say enough on their own (what painting does anymore, according to the postmodernist scheme of things?), but collectively and in concert with the room they inhabit, they manage a stirring effect. No hint of defeat, no aura of exhaustion.

Now, there is a tendency in art history and art criticism to swallow schools of painting, aesthetic philosophies, or even bodies of work whole, and Kelly's art is as good a place as any to question how sound a practice that is. An uncritical embrace of a serious artist is often as useless as a wholesale rejection. For instance, *Blue, Green, Yellow, Orange, Red* (1966), the famous—and endlessly reproduced—five joined panels owned by the Guggenheim itself, has not gained in meaning or richness over the years; prominently placed on the ground floor of the museum, it looked a bit forlorn, the class smarty-pants still sitting there trying to impress the teacher with school long out of session. It has "sixties glib" written all over it. *Black Yellow-Orange* of 1970 is just a heartless harbinger of the gnomes of eighties Neo-Geo, and many of the works from the late 1960s and 1970s aren't much more than pristinely decorative. The point: simplified color-abstraction in and of itself can be pretty meager stuff. But when the larger goals Ellsworth Kelly set for himself are realized—breaking down the boundaries between painting and sculpture or suggesting that the placement of a canvas on a wall need not be a static, standardizing procedure or creating an actual dependency between an artwork and the space in which it is viewed—he provides a sense of how much is possible for those artists, post-Picasso and post-Pollock, who feared that there was nothing left to say and nothing left to work with but vestiges and memories.

For a taste of that earlier day when a unified vision of the world and

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a faith in craft was still possible, it would be hard to do better than the Corot immersion provided in New York last fall. The bicentennial of Camille Corot's birth was celebrated with three very different shows: a 160-work retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum, an exhibition of thirty late paintings at the Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, and a group show, "In the Light of Italy: Corot and Early Open-Air Painting," at the Brooklyn Museum.

After a decade-and-a-half of glitzy museum blockbusters running the gamut from Manet/Monet/Renoir to van Gogh and Cézanne, a Corot retrospective feels right. It is time to see why all of the Impressionists, the urban-minded Degas included, looked to him as the best of his era, the painter who set the standard for everyone who followed him. And—it comes as a surprise to learn—it takes work to understand that *level* of respect and admiration; a passionate response to Corot isn't necessarily easy in the 1990s when unusual subject matter, explosive color, radical technique, and psychological tensions define historical importance and contemporary interest. In fact, a first walk-through of all three shows was apt to elicit a quizzical response (which would not be the case with, say, Turner or Constable). Is Corot really so much more penetrating and exciting than the Barbizon landscape artists he is sometimes, erroneously, linked with, a fairly dull group on the whole? The pleasure of his work, it turns out, unfolds at its own pace or not at all.

The approach at the Met was chronological and thematic. We saw the development of a style indebted to the Dutch masters and, in its early stages, reminiscent of Bonington; influenced by the impressionistic, un-classical vision of Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes; nurtured by the Italian *en plein air* mode of landscape painting in the first third of the nineteenth century (itself a revolutionary break with the traditions of studio-based art). We saw an artist whose first commissioned painting, in 1833, was of a factory owned by a friend of his father (an ironic anomaly in an oeuvre that has nothing to do with Industrialism); who was capable of large works in the heroic mode, such as the Met's own *Hagar in the Wilderness* (1835); whose nymph-filled Salon paintings of the 1840s evoke an uncharacteristic note of bombast; whose *Destruction of Sodom* (1843) shows a man alert to the wilder currents of Romanticism, but whose strengths of temperament lay elsewhere. That temperament was not unique (as the Brooklyn exhibition makes clear), but it was given its most assured expression in Corot's hands. It was anti-majestic, anti-political, acutely observant, rigorous and patient. It had to do with a love of morning or midday light on stone (the stone of an exposed cliff, the stone of a castle wall), the reflection of stone in water, solidity and watery stillness side-by-side. It had to do with a preoccupation with the contrasting roundness and mobility of wind-driven treetops and clouds and the fugitive play of shadows and mist. It had to do with a reverence for these things themselves and *not*, as in Turner or Constable or later in the Impressionists or in Winslow Homer, with an *idea* of these things, a creative intrusion of intellect and sensibility on the visible world. Not

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even with the idea of Realism, a highly charged concept in the hands of Courbet and the literary crowd. This isn't to call Corot an unthinking camera's eye: there is no perception without a mind behind it, and an individual is everywhere apparent in compositional croppings and luminous brushstrokes. *Civita Castellana* (1827) has some of the "chiselled" patching we associate with Cézanne, and *Island of San Bartolommeo* (1828) is all artful tone and texture. The eyes, the flesh, and the lanky frame in the black suit in *Toussaint Lemaistre* (1833), Corot's nephew by marriage, represent a conscious decision in favor of the personal and unpretentious. But it is to suggest an artist for whom the great end of painting was to make others as observant, rigorous, and patient as he felt nature (or, rather, God) wanted us to be. The pace of the city, the self-consciousness of modern man, and the steamroller of Industrialism would soon make that impossible. Corot knew this. He continued to paint. What he painted were whole, harmonious, unconflicted, lyrical paintings.

The particular benefit of the Brooklyn exhibition, which included nineteen Corots among 130 paintings by other European artists who also spent time in Italy, was that it situated the man whom Degas called "the greatest of us all" in a specific context to illustrate the difference between solid craftsmanship and a profound gift. Dozens of artists circa 1800–1840 mastered the intricacies of working on-site and responded sensitively to the ruins of Rome and the terrain of the Campagna. "In the Light of Italy" lines them up. But to look at the well-wrought landscapes of Johan Christian Dahl (1788–1857) of Norway or Heinrich Carl Reinhold (1788–1824) of Germany next to the Corots that treat the same natural phenomena and outdoor scenes is to feel the great gap between talent and genius. Part of the difference is not fully explicable, of course, and part of it is simply a matter of higher technical skills—which were not always to be counted on—or of Corot's special feel for the oranges, ochres, and reddish-browns that make his soil so resplendent. But another part of it seems to have to do with steadiness and faith, in his mission and his medium and his own relationship to nature directly observed. The excessive detail, the occasional straining for the picturesque, the subordination of the painted to the drawn areas of a picture, the confined space, and the merely functional quality of the light that mar some of the weaker landscapes by other artists in the exhibition are less prominent in Corot. Other than to the source-hunting art historian, his vistas allude to nothing beyond themselves, that is to say, to the beauty of the world and to the wonder of painting, to a joy in the purely visual which became a sadly suspect emotion in the next century.

Of late, fragmentation has been something to contemplate not only as a key element of art, but as part of the art-exhibition process itself. This is not always a bad thing. "Views from Abroad: European Perspectives on American Art" sounded like an excellent idea when it was first an-

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nounced at the Whitney, and Part I of this exhibition-project was actually quite successful. A European museum curator rummaged through the permanent collection of the American museum and put together a survey that broke with "schools" and time-lines and gave a fresh angle on both well-known and long-ignored works—in fact, that show was a lot more exciting in its choices and unexpected juxtapositions than "An American Story" or "New York, City of Ambition," the two historical exhibitions the Whitney itself offered last year. With "Views from Abroad, II," though, the air has pretty much gone out of the balloon.

The premise this time was to show artworks from the Whitney's permanent collection in proximity to related works by contemporary German artists—a very young and very trendy group, as it turns out (i.e., nary a painter in the bunch). The trouble was that the linkages the Whitney's guest curator established were excruciatingly thin, by turns solemn and campy as all get-out. Do household objects play a role in modern American art (e.g., Vija Celmins' painting of a portable heater)? Take note that Andreas Slominski has his tidy stacks of dishtowels under glass as well. Did Georgia O'Keeffe paint floral and abstract forms with erotic rhythms and vaginal innuendoes? Then get a load of Stephan Melzl's ride-'em-cowboy weiners and vaginas on a plate. Alex Katz likes to paint people close-up and bigger than life. Well, Beat Streuli does the same with a camera (not very interestingly, but they're people and they sure are big). The result: a gallery with a middling-dull Katz and four Streulis in Plexibox frames. The Whitney owns a lot of Edward Hopper drawings and we know what they're all about, but did we realize that Martin Honert deals in loneliness and alienation too? *Haus* and *Foto* are, respectively, an abandoned dollhouse-size home and an epoxy-and-wood sculpture of a little boy alone at a kitchen table, an Ed Kienholz all tidied up. Imagining O'Keeffe and Hopper's reactions to being found in this throwaway company was only one source of the comedy at this show. Thinking about the decline of German art from Nolde and Beckmann to Melzl and Honert was more sobering.

It's a neat trick to be both earnest and daffy in the context of the same exhibition, but curator Jean-Christophe Ammann of the Frankfurt MoMA managed to do just that. The only thing I learned at the Whitney was that Americans like to give their artworks relevant titles, while the *wunderkinder* know only two words: "Ohne Titel." ("Untitled" for even those vaginas on a plate? those perky hotdogs? those nice dishtowels? Seems a bit cheap.) Two points, maybe, for raising high the tattered banner of "épater les bourgeois": Jochen Flinzer gives it his naughty but feeble best in his embroidered-thread-on-paper work spelling out "FUCK/ASS/SUCK/COCK/KY." The fifty-two well-carved penguins that filled the area outside the fourth-floor elevator were, however, completely and utterly charming.

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RICHARD HORNBY

Hiroshima et l'amour

A G.I. ASSIGNED TO PHOTOGRAPH THE AFTEREFFECTS of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima encounters an English-speaking Japanese widow who has been repulsively scarred by the blast. Strangely, they become lovers, and have a son. The soldier then returns to the United States, to his wife and other son. Thus, Robert Lepage's *Seven Streams of the River Ota* begins, not as a war play about Hiroshima, but as a variation on *Madam Butterfly*, a play of desire and betrayal, amplified by cultural clash.

Seven Streams is another panoramic play, like Robert Schenkkan's *Kentucky Cycle*, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, or the Theatre de la Jeune Lune's *Children of Paradise*, that the nonprofit theatre has been spawning of late. Splendidly mounted and acted, abundantly detailed and leisurely paced, full of both intensely individualized characters and broad political and social implications, such plays are a most encouraging sign in a theatre otherwise suffering from budget cuts, escapist or narcissistic productions, and declining audiences.

The River Ota runs through Hiroshima in seven branches, reflected in the play by seven scenes. *Seven Streams* moves back and forward over six decades, on three continents, uses four languages, and takes six hours to perform. It manages to touch on war, politics, the Holocaust, Zen Buddhism, opera, dance, theatre, art, AIDS, jazz, and baseball, but it focuses on a small number of engaging characters, all of whom relate back to that amorous encounter in Hiroshima, a place of death and destruction but also, as the program notes, of rebirth and survival. In 1965, Jeffrey Yamashita, son of the G.I. and his Japanese lover, comes to New York City to study jazz, and happens to encounter his half brother, Jeffrey O'Connor, and their father, Luke O'Connor. All are living in a shabby rooming house, whose zany inhabitants recall Kaufman and Hart's *You Can't Take It with You*, but the episode ends sadly, with the death of Luke from leukemia, probably induced by exposure to radiation.

Twenty years later, we are in Amsterdam, where Jeffrey O'Connor has AIDS. He chooses to die with dignity in an assisted suicide, in the presence of his brother and friends, including a Dutch girlfriend named Ada he had met in that New York rooming house. Subsequent scenes take place in Japan, but include a flashback to the ghetto of Terezin under the Nazis. Jana Capek, an avant-garde artist who as a child had met Ada's mother in the ghetto, comes to Japan to meet Ada, who is living in the Yamashita house. Jeffrey Yamashita has married a Japanese

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woman, blinded as a child by the atomic blast, who now works as a translator of French. This leads to connections with the Canadian consulate, as well as to an actress from a French-Canadian theatre company visiting Japan. In final scenes, Jana has become an adept of Zen, more Japanese than the Japanese. Jeffrey Yamashita has died (males are short-lived in this play!), but his son lives on with his blind mother. Pierre Maltais, the son of the French-Canadian actress who has been his mother's friend, comes to live in the house while studying *Butoh* dancing, and the two young men become lovers, rounding out the story that began with the illicit love of the American soldier and his disfigured Japanese mistress.

The last Robert Lepage production I saw, his direction of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the National Theatre in London (reviewed here in Volume XLV, Number 4 [Winter 1993]), was the worst Shakespeare I have ever seen (despite considerable competition for that honor), so that I practically had to be dragged, kicking and screaming, to the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Majestic Theatre last fall to see *Seven Streams*. Nevertheless, the fact that this time he was using his own script (developed with input from his theatre company) apparently led him to drop his mannerisms and self-indulgences. There were some directorial gimmicks, such as rear projections, mirror tricks, shadow effects, and puppetry, but all served to tell the story of the play, which was a good one. Fortuitous events like the chance encounter of the half brothers did not seem forced or contrived, but rather to result from the chaotic nature of life in the post-Hiroshima world, where good luck and bad have nothing to do with virtue or destiny but result from pure chance. Those who died or were injured in the atomic blast were neither better nor worse than those who were not; they just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The only false note in the story is the suicide of Jeffrey O'Connor, which comes out of the blue. We have not seen him in twenty years; he announces that he has AIDS and wants to die with dignity; he does. His demise again can be seen as a result of bad luck, but since there is little conflict surrounding the event (his former girlfriend at first objects to helping him, then quickly acquiesces), and no background to it (How did he get the disease? How does it relate back to Hiroshima?), the lengthy, clinical, assisted-suicide scene is merely a play for cheap sympathy. By contrast, the death of Luke, father of the two Jeffreys, is far more compelling, though Lepage's staging never showed us more than the back of Luke's head.

My description of the play may sound gloomy, but there is considerable humor in it, including sharp social satire, which Lepage (French-Canadian like most of the rest of his company) usually aims at his fellow Québecois. He depicts a god-awful production of a Feydeau farce, *La Dame de chez Maxime*, performed by a French-Canadian company on an official government cultural tour to Japan, the equivalent of our own State Department promoting a tour of Actors' Studio types playing

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Oscar Wilde. A stuffy French-Canadian diplomat who attends the performance turns out to be a compulsive womanizer, bedding the lead actress in a scene that hilariously recapitulates Feydeau. The diplomat's wife sneers at the crude Québecois actors, flaunting her Parisian education and accent; years later, after becoming a Montréal TV hostess, she has rediscovered her *Joual* twang, and is boycotting imports from France because of its nuclear policy! Such ambivalence toward their home and native land is typical of both French and English Canadians. Self-contempt alternates with strident nationalism.

Lepage's actors, all but one Québecois, had plenty to be proud of, however. Wonderfully trained and versatile (most studied at the Conservatoire d'Art Dramatique de Québec, as did Lepage), they were totally convincing in the wide range of languages, accents, and nationalities. Anne-Marie Cadieux, for example, in her various roles flawlessly spoke English with a Japanese accent, English with a New York accent, English with a Québecois accent, *Joual*, and standard French! Other aspects of characterization were equally well differentiated. Until browsing through the program at intermission, for example, I did not realize that Marie Brassard was playing both an eleven-year-old Czech girl, and the blind Japanese translator, who has to age during the play from thirty to sixty. Yet Brassard achieved her transformations with nothing external other than a change of costume and wig, and the addition of dark glasses. With every member of the cast, the performances were not impersonation gimmicks, but deeply felt, rounded, fascinating creations.

Carl Fillion designed a superb setting for the play, a placid three-room Japanese house with sliding doors that was the Hiroshima home of three generations of characters. Like the actors, however, with a few simple changes the house could become radically different—a scruffy New York tenement, two different railway stations, and even backstage at a theatre for the Feydeau production. The lighting, by Sonoyo Nishikawa, was subtle and evocative; costumes and wigs (including a magnificent gold kimono that became a symbol of Hiroshima), by Marie-Chantale Vaillancourt and Yvan Gaudin, were effective; Claude Soucy's musical score, which included amplified strings, a whirling tube, and a stainless steel gong, was mysterious and wonderful. Bravo Lepage & Co.! But stay away from Shakespeare.

Why am I always complaining that Americans can no longer play English roles? Frank Langella performed the lead in last fall's Broadway production of Noel Coward's *Present Laughter* as though the part had been written for him. Langella combines the expressive eyes of a movie star with the perfect diction, timing, and range of intonation of a stage pro. Since the *role* is of an egotistical star actor ("Have you ever seen me overact?" "Frequently—you're overacting now."), it requires an energy and panache onstage that few Americans can muster, but which for Langella are as natural as breathing.

Purists were offended by Scott Elliott's direction of the show, which

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added a good deal of farcical business to the original, not to mention nudity, which of course would have been impossible on the legitimate stage in 1942, when the play was written. Nevertheless, I loved every minute. Coward's plays, tossed off in a matter of days or weeks, are delightful, but are hardly masterpieces. He knew how to write funny dialog, and there are always some terrific scenes, but most of his plays also have torpid sections, and a weak overall structure. *Present Laughter* gets a lot of mileage out of an aging matinée idol who is pursued by an aspiring young actress, an earnest young playwright, and a friend's lecherous wife, running them in and out of the actor's elegant London townhouse until all the combinations have been used up and the play stops. One of the characters even says that she feels as if she is in a French farce (a form that Coward knew intimately and even translated), so why not embellish the piece with some farcical business? I found the nudity and trickery a sly, delightful comment on the prissier theatre of fifty years ago.

The supporting cast varied in ability. Tim Hopper was hilarious as the serious but inept playwright, even managing to upstage Langella at times. Caroline Seymour was beautiful but mechanical as the friend's wife, while Kellie Overbey was weak as the aspiring actress, failing to be bad in an interesting or convincing manner. Derek McLane's two-story setting was flamboyant, as were Ann Roth's nifty costumes. Steven Ross pounded out period tunes on the piano before the show and during intermissions, then slipped back into the play to perform effectively as the butler. Great fun was had by all.

Comic genius of a different order from Frank Langella's could be seen in Bill Irwin, who adapted (with Mark O'Donnell), directed, and starred in Molière's *Scapin* for the Roundabout Theatre in New York. I saw the show in previews in December. Irwin is a classic American clown, with a rubber face and body used with endless comic invention. He is not so agile vocally, however. The contrast between his physical (including facial) overplaying and vocal underplaying gave him a special charm; other characters would rant and rave, while he would reply innocuously, punctuating the remark with a wink or a move. Adding to the goofy atmosphere was an organist, Bruce Hurlbut, dressed in a long red tailcoat and top hat like a Dr. Seuss character, who played tunes like "Nola" and "Shine on Harvest Moon" from a niche above the stage, as if at a ballpark.

Douglas Stein's setting recalled the sixteenth-century perspective stage sets of Italian Renaissance artist Sebastiano Serlio; they were even in black-and-white, as were Serlio's sets, interestingly enough. The whole production had more the feel of Renaissance *commedia dell'arte* than of Molière (though the playwright himself was influenced by a *commedia* troupe in residence in Paris), more physical than verbal, with many *lazzi* (physical gags) and topical satire. Lawyers, DNA experts, and politicians all took their lumps, but the best part of the show was a Keystone Cops chase that had the audience breathless.

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The Roundabout is now running two theatres. Next door to *Scapin* was a production of Anouilh's *The Rehearsal*, starring Roger Rees and David Threlfall, two Englishmen known for their performances as Nicholas and Smike in the early 1980s in the Royal Shakespeare Company's *Nicholas Nickleby*. I am no great fan of Anouilh. Like so much of French drama, his plays are static and talky, while his cherished theme of youthful feminine purity versus middle-aged masculine worldliness seems dated and sexist. (Have the feminist critics had a go at Anouilh? They should.)

In *The Rehearsal*, written in 1950, the decadent Count de Febroques falls in love with his children's young governess, Lucile. He invites members of his set to his chateau to rehearse an amateur production of Marivaux's eighteenth-century comedy, *La Double Inconstance* (*The Double Inconstancy*). Casting himself as the hero, and Lucile as the heroine, the Count is thus able to play passionate love scenes with the young woman. The Count's wife, although fully accepting of her husband's many affairs in the past, is furious that this time he seems genuinely in love. Scheming to drive Lucile from the chateau, the Countess enlists the aid of the Count's drunken friend Hero, who first offers Lucile money, supposedly from the Count, if she will leave. When she thus becomes thoroughly disillusioned with the Count, Hero manages to seduce her.

The play has many loose ends. Why would Lucile, for example, take the word of drunken Hero, whom she dislikes, at face value? But the most disappointing aspect of *The Rehearsal* is its failure to exploit the play-within-the-play device. It is mildly amusing that the parts the Count assigns to his friends all turn out to be just like their real-life selves, but otherwise the inner play seems to exist solely as a means of seducing Lucile, and does not even succeed in doing that. Marivaux's play is all about role-playing, but Anouilh's surrounding piece is just a variation on the trite theme of lechery versus purity.

Threlfall, a good actor, was miscast as the Count, lacking elegance, sexuality, or jadedness. (It would be hard to imagine a character more different from Smike.) Rees, however, was superb as Hero. It is a challenge to play a drunken role of any length without getting monotonous, and Hero is constantly intoxicated. Rees found endless variety in the part by focussing on the reasons behind the drinking, the character's cynicism and emptiness, as well as his love/hate relationship toward the Count, who had once "helped" his friend by talking him out of marrying a woman beneath his station. Rees made it clear that Hero is driven not by lust for Lucile, nor even by an urge to pull her off her pedestal, but by a desire for poetic justice, destroying the love of a friend who had once destroyed his. (The French word for *rehearsal* is *répétition*, a pun that does not translate.) Rees's drive and emotional range made the lengthy *tirades* surprisingly compelling. He also exploited the humor of the only witty lines in this "comedy."

Anna Gunn was adequate in the thankless role of Lucile, rather tall and gawky but nonetheless convincingly pure and sincere. Robert Brill's

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settings looked authentically French; Michael Krass's costumes successfully contrasted Louis XV and Christian Dior overrefinement; Nicholas Martin's direction kept things moving, but often failed to develop secondary conflicts, like the ongoing feud between Hero and the Countess' lover, or to get vivid performances out of the mostly indifferent cast. His staging of Lucile's ultimate deflowering as a rape, however, made better sense than Anouilh's having her submit to Hero out of disillusionment.

Julie Taymor's puppetry is art of a very high order. Her production of *Juan Darién* at the Vivian Beaumont Theatre at Lincoln Center included puppets of birds, animals, insects, skeletons, and humans; even the jungle setting was a mysterious puppet, growing magically before our eyes.

Nevertheless, I found the production as a whole to be heavy and sentimental. The plot, based on a tale by Uruguayan writer Horacio Quirogá, tells of an orphaned jaguar cub raised as a human boy (a reversal on the archetype of the human child raised by animals), who is tormented and finally crucified by bigoted villagers, but who eventually escapes to live again as a jaguar in the jungle. There was almost no dialog; communication was through music (very good, composed by Elliot Goldenthal, who is also listed with Taymor as co-author) and images, with only occasional words muttered or chanted, or sung as lyrics to naive songs. Characterization was simplistic—humans, bad; animals, good. The whole thing was really an excuse for a tour de force of puppetry, of which there was every kind imaginable. There were hand puppets and marionettes, stick puppets, shadow puppets (in color!), and a phantasmagoria of masks, some of them three or four feet in diameter. There was also a single unmasked performance, by young Daniel Hodd, who touchingly played the jaguar boy with simple charm, occasionally singing in a beautiful soprano. But unlike Taymor's production of Gozzi's *The Green Bird* last season, which had a light touch, *Juan Darién* flaunted her skill at the expense of wit, insight, or drama. In contrast with Robert Lepage, Taymor seems better with pre-existing material.

The Shakespeare Marathon at the New York Shakespeare Festival, which was to have performed all of Shakespeare by 1992, has been limping along to the finish, perhaps to die there like the original Marathon messenger. I went down to see the *Henry VI* plays because the director, Karen Coonrad, had shown promise in the past with her own company, the Arden Party. Alas, the banality that has polluted the Public Theatre for the past decade seemed to have affected her.

There were ten callow actors playing the many roles; all wore ugly yellow undergarments (designed by Constance Hoffman), with additions that rarely told you enough about who was who. My companion had to point out to me that the French always wore a shade of blue—except the king, whose crown was supposed to do the trick by itself. No doubt there were other arcane codes operating as well. Adding

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to the confusion, some props were tangible, others merely mimed. The setting (designed by P. K. Wish) was a misshapen, gently sloping quadrilateral with audience on opposite sides, an awkward arrangement at best. Coonrad also used the trite device of having the actors onstage at all times, which is exhausting for them; nothing is more tiring than having to stand motionless, pretending to be interested in what you have actually observed hundreds of times. These actors were so tense, generalized, and ill-spoken, however, that extra energy would not have mattered much. (My notes say, "Can't anyone in this cast pronounce the letter S?") I get paid to watch a lot of bad undergraduate theatre at home. Here, I left at intermission.

The oddest production of the season in New York was not a play, but a recitation by Fiona Shaw of T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land." Staged by Deborah Warner, who last directed the Irish-born actress in the lead role of Shakespeare's *Richard II*, the piece was performed at the Liberty Theatre, one of the old playhouses on Forty-Second Street now slated for restoration. Its current atmosphere of gloomy decay was perfect for Eliot's poem.

The lobby and box office at the Liberty were such a mess that you could not even buy tickets there, but had to get them two blocks away. Entering the orchestra, much of it shrouded in plastic sheets, with many seats blocked off as dangerous to sit on, you certainly felt that Western civilization, or at least this part of it, had reached an end. Shaw entered dressed in gray and black, illuminated only by half a dozen bare electric bulbs. The poem works well when recited—do not be put off by the recording of Eliot himself, who reads it in a monotone. There are numerous dramatic monologues in it, with a wide range of voices, all of which Shaw handled well, though I did not agree with all her choices. Why, for example, should she shout "Hurry up please, it's time" angrily? Variations on the phrase, still to be heard in English pubs at closing time, have always been said politely whenever I have heard them. But perhaps Shaw does not go to pubs.

She did go to drama school, however, and her vocal training at RADA was evident. My complaint about her Richard was that, although she got the characterization well, she mangled the verse. Here she handled Eliot's jazzy rhythms expertly. I only wish she had tossed in a few more poems; thirty-five dollars for thirty-five minutes is a bit much! "Prufrock" or "The Hollow Men," for example, would have worked well on the sepulchral stage. But the thirty-five minutes were more dramatic than much on Broadway.

Correction: In Richard Hornby's review in the Winter 1997 issue, the name of the Artistic Director of the Globe should be Mark Rylance.

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JOSIAH FISK

Discovering Ives, Once Again

IT'S HARD TO THINK OF ANY COMPOSER who has been discovered—who has needed to be discovered—as many times as Charles Ives. We have been trying to get a fix on him for seventy-five years. We have studied, recorded, edited and published him. We have brought his music to the masses (last year, *Three Places in New England*, one of the least likely crowd-pleasers of all time, was actually recorded by the Boston Pops). He is about to be on a postage stamp. In short, by most measures we have discovered Ives quite thoroughly. How well we have understood him is another matter.

To see why this is so, we should recall how the discovery of Ives began. In the early 1920s Ives, at his own considerable expense, printed up editions of some of his writings and music and mailed them out to several hundred libraries, journals and musicians. For eighteen years he had labored essentially in private, observing the musical establishment only from a distance. Launching these volumes into an unsuspecting world was Ives's effort to end this semi-isolation and begin the process of being found. The first salvo was *Essays Before a Sonata*—Ives on his best behavior, trying to look as reasonable and erudite as he feared his music wouldn't. Then came the main offensive, the *Concord* Sonata. He followed this a year later with *114 Songs*. The songs were part fresh troops, part olive branch: some shared the aggressive inventiveness of *Concord* while others were tonal and even sentimental.

The campaign was an utter failure. The sophistication of the entire effort—the books as well as Ives's strategy for disseminating them—was lost on the recipients. Ives got back terse thank-you notes, sarcastic dismissals or in most cases nothing at all. Not a single person stared at the tangled notes of the sonata or the stylistic plurality of the songs and saw unalloyed genius staring back. A very few caught a glimmer of something, they weren't sure what. Who were these brave souls? Mostly people of good musical skills and small, non-mainstream reputations. Discouragingly, their open-mindedness had a way of turning out to be connected to a taste for the occult (the British composer and pianist Arnold Capleton asked Ives for a photo so he could study his forehead). More than one thought he had found a fellow traveler of Alexander Scriabin, if not Karl Marx.

When the dust had settled there was little to show: a handful of articles, most of them derogatory, some tentative performances and the beginnings of a few friendships, only one of them (that with the writer

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and musician Henry Bellamann) with someone close to his wavelength. Ives must have been devastated. He had spent a fortune for the privilege of being called a crank and a nobody. Only in retrospect would it be possible to see this as the first discovery of Charles Ives, and his vanity-press mail campaign as the beginning of an international reputation.

Given the nature of *Concord* and many of the songs, it was inevitable that Ives would come to the attention of the modernist composers and musicians who were beginning to establish themselves in the United States in the early 1920s. For several reasons this did not happen right away—one reason being that they were not on Ives's mailing list. When, a few years later, some of those *Concord*s and *114 Songs* found their way into their hands, the ones who took the greatest notice were the "Ultra-Modernists," a group of self-styled innovators that included Henry Cowell and Carl Ruggles. Ives had been discovered again.

Impressed by his innovations, made so early and in comparative solitude, the American modernists honored him as a sort of freelance patriarch of their cause. Ives returned the admiration with financial support, giving away hundreds of thousands of dollars from his insurance fortune. Cowell began to promote Ives. Ruggles became a close friend. Slowly the pace of performances and articles picked up, with names and venues increasingly more mainstream. By 1932 Ives's music had been played in several American and European cities. In 1939 came the famous Lawrence Gilman review of *Concord*, calling it "the greatest music composed by an American." Six more years brought Ives's election to the National Institute of Arts and Letters, another six years a performance by the New York Philharmonic—the premiere of the Second Symphony under Leonard Bernstein. But by that time it was already 1951 and Ives, a frail seventy-six, had only a few years left to live.

From the time *Concord* went off in the mail to the time a New York critic dared to call it great music, eighteen years went by. By Ivesian standards, that wasn't long. At the time of its premiere the Second Symphony had been finished for forty years. Some of the material in it had been around for sixty.

Facts like this fascinated the public, for whom the notion of Ives as a homegrown musical inventor was at least as appealing as his music. Thus as the discovery of Ives proceeded, it increasingly became the discovery of the story of Ives—the story of the Connecticut Yankee who had gotten a dunking in the European art music tradition at Yale only to shake off every drop, who had made his living not in music but as an insurance executive, who had written in self-imposed exile, who had beaten every modernist to the punch. He'd picked up his appetite for freethinking and experimentation from his father George, a village bandmaster and musical jack-of-all-trades. He had an affinity for Emerson and the Concord transcendentalists. And yes, if you were interested in it, there was the music. It was rough-and-tumble, a seemingly careless mélange of

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the workaday tunes of his childhood—odd, but intriguing. Rounding out the story was a sad and ironic postscript: by the time anyone had discovered him, he'd more or less stopped composing. It's easy to understand why the world looked at Ives and saw that rarest of rarities, the self-invented genius.

That Ives could be crazy and cantankerous only added to the story. His native shyness had something to do with this behavior, and later so did his bad health and encroaching senility. But there was a more basic reason, one Ives must have sensed with infinite discomfort from the earliest days onward: except for a small minority—most of them personal friends—no one was approaching Ives the way they approached other composers. They weren't interested in his music as music. The myth had brought him all kinds of recognition, but it had made it almost impossible for his work to get a fair hearing.

Ives was enduring the fate of many anomalous artists: attention at the expense of understanding. Because he seemed to offer few points of reference, it was easy for observers to see whatever they liked. This had certainly been the case with the occultists—there's about as much mystical flummery in Ives as there is in Mark Twain—but in many ways it was equally true with the modernists. For at heart Ives was not a modernist at all. His social and moral values were deeply traditional, and they were thoroughly entwined with his creative impulses. Ives was an innovator not by inclination but through a strange confluence of urges, talents and beliefs. He was a prophet in spite of himself.

His friends among the modernists no doubt sensed this. Some were disconcerted by it (Elliott Carter for one), others were grateful enough for the company that they overlooked it. In any event it had to have been a big part of why Ives never made any effort to approach the modernists, even though he must have known they would be more open-minded than the average musician. It would also explain why Ives's response to the music of these composers was usually oblique (other than Ruggles, he rarely gave an indication that their music did anything for him). He was grateful for the company too, but he did not see himself as one of them. For their part, as much as they might honor Ives and appreciate his generosity, the modernists could never quite see him as a full-fledged composer.

If the enthusiasm of the modernists was inevitable, it was probably equally inevitable that the Ives myth would be their legacy, for the heart of the myth was the view of Ives as an innovator first and foremost. By the time the musical public really became aware of Ives in the 1940s, the myth was entrenched and inescapable. It took on different forms with the times. First it was Ives the hardy pioneer and source of self-conscious Americana à la Copland or Roy Harris. In the 1960s, it was Ives the proto-hippie and smasher of laws, a musical cousin to that era's equally distorted Thoreau ("sure-fire lease-breaking stuff" wrote the New York *Times* of Stokowski's recording of the Symphony No. 4). By his centennial in 1974 Ives had settled down to being the country's musical

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grandfather, a patriotic and colorful fellow whose place in history books and concert programs was more a matter of Yankee ingenuity than iconoclasm.

That this story can be told today is because we are in the midst of another discovery of Ives. A new generation of scholars is offering us an Ives who stems directly from the European-American art music tradition and who fits comfortably within his historical circumstances. The old comparisons to other composers are being taken up again, this time to prove similarity rather than difference. The music is also being reassessed, and the result is strong evidence that, as Ivesians have long been heard to mutter, he is less a flawed genius than a genius, period. His music is beautiful and it is whole. He is, in other words, a composer first and an innovator second.

This new vision of Ives may be found in several new books, but it comes through most effectively in a life-and-works biography by Jan Swafford[1] and an examination by J. Peter Burkholder of Ives's use of existing musical materials.[2] These two volumes are major additions to the literature, the most helpful and insightful books on Ives in many years.

Swafford is a writer, composer and lifelong Ivesian. His is a thoughtful and sympathetic telling of Ives's life, liberally spiked with Ives's own words, thoroughly researched and fun to read. That might also describe Frank Rossiter's *Charles Ives and His America* (1975), a biography still worth reading, but Swafford combines this with lucid and largely non-technical discussions of the music. The findings and views of recent Ives scholarship are represented also, in many of their particulars as well as in the book's basic outlook. What makes this book so valuable is Swafford's skill in weaving the strands of all these areas of knowledge into a cohesive fabric. It is as close as we may come for quite some time to a compleat Ives.

Swafford always tells you what he thinks, and why, but he also lets perceptions float to the surface. I was struck as I had not been before by Ives's bashfulness, for example, and its connection to the frequent representations of distance in his music. The memories that Ives's music articulates (and to some extent conflates, as Stuart Feder has noted in his problematical psychobiography) are the memories of an observer, often one who is at a remove from sound-producing events. Ives's love of the childhood camp meetings where George led the music was not a love of joining the "thousands of 'let-out' souls" but of "how the sound used to come through the trees." Even his desire for control, which Swafford also lays before us, could not draw him from the margins. Ives the organist and Ives the theater pit pianist both worked outside of the

[1] CHARLES IVES: A Life in Music, by *Jan Swafford*. Yale University Press. $30.00.

[2] ALL MADE OF TUNES: Charles Ives and the Uses of Musical Borrowing, by *J. Peter Burkholder*. Yale University Press. $35.00.

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spotlight, and later when he ran Ives & Myrick it was from an office around a corner with its own exit. Possibly the best example is Swafford's highly entertaining section on Ives's endless courtship with Harmony Twichell—endless because it literally took him years to work up his courage to say that he *liked* her.

It takes a few chapters for this book to hit its stride, and readers may feel that some parts are overwritten; the passages in which Swafford novelizes certain events seem like a failure to trust the strength of his material and his style. That is a small complaint. The book's intelligence, the clarity of its thought and the judiciousness of its arguments carry the day.

In the past ten years Peter Burkholder has emerged as the leading Ives scholar of his generation. His first book on Ives, *Charles Ives: The Ideas Behind the Music* (1985), is a slim but essential volume, the first to challenge certain parts of the myth. *All Made of Tunes* is his most important book to date, and is the first systematic examination of the way Ives used existing music. Burkholder identifies seven different procedures, from modeling one work on another to creating a collage out of snippets of many works, with a structure and character that are new. He also gives the fullest treatment yet of "cumulative form," his term for Ives's most characteristic procedure, in which a tune is assembled or uncovered as a work proceeds, so that the tune assumes its identity only at the very end.

The book is jammed with musical examples, many of them tracing the overlapping contours of melodies, motifs and rhythms by showing the sources—sometimes several of them at once—lined up against Ives's music. Ives's talents for musical transformation and conflation (surely related to his love of puns) are revealed as formidable and in constant operation. Ives almost never quotes complete or verbatim, and he very often quotes from more than one work, or from different parts of the same work, at the same time. The point is not the tunes but what happens to them, and the result is not merely counterpoint in the musical sense but a counterpoint of meanings, images and associations.

I find Burkholder at his most intriguing when he analyzes works as paraphrases. He demonstrates, to take one small example, that the brief hymn quotation at the end of the song "West London" is neither gratuitous nor ironic, as some have suggested, but is in fact only the emergence of the music of which the entire song is a two-stanza paraphrase, the hymn tune "Fountain." The entire "Housatonic at Stockbridge" is analyzed as a four-verse paraphrase of the hymn "Dorrnance"—a favorite of Ives, in part since its opening motif is related to another hymn, Zeuner's "Missionary Chant," and to Beethoven's Fifth. In 425 pages of text and another hundred of notes and back matter, Burkholder demonstrates that Ives's control of his material was amazingly sophisticated and consistent, more than almost anyone had thought. It is a tour de force, and it should consign to perpetual rest many of the criticisms that have long shadowed Ives's music.

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Burkholder has also had a hand in two more new books. *Charles Ives and the Classical Tradition*[3] offers seven essays, each exploring the similarities between Ives and a different composer or tradition. All the essays are interesting, particularly Nicholas Tawa's on Ives and the New England School (of which Ives's teacher Horatio Parker was a member) and Robert P. Morgan's on Ives and Mahler. If ultimately the many connections identified in these essays are not enough to overturn the notion that Ives inhabited his own musical world, they do show us that this world, however remote it may have been, was scarcely isolated. The Ives that emerges from this book is private and distant, but he frequently moves in step with his peers and he owes just as much to his forebears as any other composer. This is a valuable perception.

Charles Ives and His World[4] was published in conjunction with the Bard Music Festival, which last season focused on Ives. The festival was an intensive affair, fitting eleven concerts, nine pre-concert talks, four panels, a full-day conference and a church service into two successive weekends in August. A two-day program—most of it entirely different—was given at Alice Tully Hall in November. The events were designed to provide contexts for Ives's music, mostly by playing it alongside music from his childhood and by his approximate contemporaries. The Tully programs included first-rate performances by the Colorado String Quartet and less polished but more instructive performances by the American Symphony Orchestra led by Leon Botstein, the Yale Glee Club and the Yale Chamber Winds. It is striking to hear music like contradances, fraternity songs or D. W. Reeves's "Second Regiment Connecticut National Guard March" next to Ives's quotations. The originals seem two-dimensional on their own; paradoxically, they seem far more themselves in Ives, where you have to work a bit to pull them out of their sonic encasements.

Worth hearing for different reasons were John J. Becker's "When the Willow Nods" and Cowell's Piano Concerto. Ives helped pay Becker's bills for years, partly out of admiration for his idealism. Ideals or not, the music is a study in failure. Becker set out to challenge convention, but every parameter that he didn't consciously think of altering came out utterly conventional. Cowell earned a bad-boy reputation with pieces like the concerto, banging out "tone clusters" at the keyboard with fists and arms. The technique has the advantage of giving the pianist a way to compete with full orchestra, but its musical possibilities are very limited, and Cowell's unrelieved usage of it dooms the piece to novelty status. Both of these pieces show just how far Ives was from the philosophy of the modernists, however many means they shared.

Charles Ives and His World is worthwhile for its documentary material

[3] CHARLES IVES AND THE CLASSICAL TRADITION, ed. by *Geoffrey Block* and *J. Peter Burkholder.* Yale University Press. $25.00.

[4] CHARLES IVES AND HIS WORLD, ed. by *J. Peter Burkholder.* Princeton University Press. $55.00; $19.95.

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alone. There are seventy-five pages of letters from throughout Ives's life, as well as the major reviews and essays about Ives up to the mid-1950s (some are abridged). There are also five new essays, including a fascinating look at *Concord* in the light of the musical textures and keyboard technique of Liszt and other nineteenth-century composers (by David Michael Hertz) and what is perhaps the first serious analysis of Ives's often strange political views by an expert in the social and political history of the period (Michael Broyles). It seems there has never been a better time to study Ives.

I cannot close without expressing the hope that before this present wave of enthusiasm has passed we will have found the answers to some of the questions that still remain about Ives. Many of these are perhaps unanswerable—the utter invisibility of his mother Mollie, the real nature of the so-called heart attack that incapacitated him in 1918, and how many attempts he really made to perform his music in public or to have it tried out during his years of isolation; the few incidents we know about are already enough to suggest that he was not as resigned to isolation as his later writings indicate. It would be wonderful to know more about how Ives approached the music of his contemporaries during that same period—did he hear it or see it in passing, did he sit down and analyze it, or did he absorb it by osmosis, perhaps playing through it casually and letting his prodigious unconscious go to work on it? (The latter seems to me most likely, but at this point it's no more than a hunch.)

Other questions might have answers. It seems impossible that Horatio Parker could have missed the size of Ives's talent, whatever he thought of the ways he was using it. How many near-prodigies and freshman symphonists did he ever see? If Parker were jealous, that surely would have affected his relationship with Ives. Then there is a matter that must strike anyone who has looked at material from Ives's childhood: how and when did he metamorphose from a boy with no evident verbal talents into the polished author of the essays? It wasn't at Yale, and if it was as late as his marriage to Harmony (who put Ives onto literature), it would mean that Ives "took up" writing only in his mid-thirties. That would be remarkable, and like the Parker question could have implications for understanding Ives.

More valuable still would be to know the precise impact of Ives's experience as an organist on his composing. It is evident that Ives was uncommonly attuned to aural phenomena: when as a child he heard those two bands marching by each other, the point is not just that he remembered it, but that it affected his ear. From such experiences he learned to separate and measure sound, an ability he used in reverse in assembling his music. In the same way, his music reveals a great sensitivity to the sonic characteristics of the organ. To cite just one example, the archetypal Ives climax is an uncanny depiction of the sound of both feet and forearms planted on the keyboards, full organ drawn. This can only be a presentation of aural memory, probably of

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things Ives did as a kid at the console and never forgot. Dozens of Ives works originated as organ pieces. Most of the originals have been lost, but the imprint survives in the music. I'm not aware that anyone has studied this phenomenon closely.

There is also a composer comparison that, even with all the dozens that have been made, has never yet been undertaken. It is with one of Ives's closest contemporaries, a man who mirrored Ives in his artistic independence and isolation, his predilection for approaching composition through keyboard habits, his moral punctiliousness, appetite for privacy and—most significant—his preoccupation with a vanished past. Both men were not only derided by critics but found (and still find) many within the musical establishment unwilling to take their music seriously at all. The composer is, of course, Rachmaninoff. Ives called him "Rachnotmanenough" and wrote him off as a musician for the "soft ears" (he had similar knocks for Haydn, Mozart and Chopin). In doing so Ives was only reacting to the perception of Rachmaninoff that was common then and to a large extent still is: that he is retrograde and unchallenging. In this regard Ives and Rachmaninoff are truly mirrors. One used a new language to honor the past, the other wrote in an old language about what had become of the past, hiding strange and even modernist ideas under a surface so familiar we never think to look for them. Both are at heart Romantics. Perhaps enough time has gone by that this story, too, can now be told.

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ROBERT McDOWELL

Poetry Chronicle

IF THE TEN VOLUMES DISCUSSED HERE are indicative of the field, then American poetry is as chaotic as ever. That is good. It suggests that the debates over form, narrative, and the nature of language itself have energized and inspired poets to extend their reach in efforts that seek to make use of all of poetry's vast technical and thematic resources. The climate has little in common with the weather in which poets worked during the conformist seventies and early eighties. The ten poets featured here do not have a lot in common. But their differences, as they emerge in their verses, advance the art in small, incremental ways. Responsible poets must do this in any age.

Maxine Kumin's eleventh book of poetry, *Connecting the Dots*, will do nothing to diminish her considerable reputation.[1] Hers is a remarkable journey. The most talented survivor of the generation of self-destructive poets (Berryman, Jarrell, Lowell, Plath, Sexton), Kumin has lived long enough, and written well enough, to achieve that most elusive, coveted prize: composing one's best poems in the latter stage of one's life. She has written wiser, more generous, and mature poems than any of her long-departed peers. Especially in the poems of the last ten years, Kumin has grown into the first rank of American poets.

In this new volume, her intelligence, compassion, liveliness, and skill are everywhere apparent. Personal moments in the poet's life expand to universal experience. This is so in the epistolary sequence to her late mother, the poem to her daughter working in Bosnia; it is true in the intriguing rhymes of "The Height of the Season," in the perfect snapshot, "After the Heat Wave," and in the compact, poignant "Vignette" (a must-read for parents and children contending with Attention Deficit Disorder); it is there, too, in "Chores," a love poem about working together:

> . . . I hope in the afterlife there's none of this stuff
> he says, stripping nude in the late September Sun
> while I broom off his jeans, his sweater flocked
> with granules, his immersed-in-sawdust socks.
> I hope there's no bedding, no stalls, no barn . . .

[1] CONNECTING THE DOTS, by *Maxine Kumin*. W. W. Norton & Co. $18.95.

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But after a Bloody Mary on the terrace . . .
he says
let's walk up to the field and catch the sunset
and off we go, couple of aging fools.

I hope, he says, on the other side there's a lot
less work, but just in case I'm bringing tools.

Kumin is also capable of assuming the role of other characters, as in the relaxed, homespun monologue, "The Last Words of Henry Manley," and "The Bridge-Builder," a five-page poem in the voice of Charles Ellet, Jr., designer of the suspension bridge over Niagara Falls, on the occasion of testing the span in 1848 with a horse and cart.

If any mood dominates this collection, it is one of looking back and summing up. As I began to read through these poems I thought, "She's working up to prophecy." Later, I realized that the accumulation of Kumin's work *is* prophecy. This is the reward, perhaps, of a life lived honestly and well.

Four of the books under discussion here are New & Selecteds. Other commentators have accurately pointed out that such collections are necessities in an age when individual books of poetry go out of print within twelve months of publication. As a result, a poet stands little chance of developing a readership unless representative work from every stage of one's career is available in a single, convenient volume.

To the Bone: New and Selected Poems recalls the work of five earlier volumes by Sydney Lea and presents fourteen new poems written between 1991 and 1995.[2] I hope that this book brings many new readers to Lea's work, for the poems make it clear that over the last sixteen years he has quietly produced a more solid body of work than many of his celebrated peers. A noted nature writer and novelist, Lea in his poetry evokes his home region, the dark woods and harsh seasons of the Northeast. It is a poetry in which "old names blow through us like consecration," that knows "a story / gives shape to a life." It is elegiac, sad yet redemptive, and succeeds either shaped into free or traditionally formal verse.

He passed the school. Everyone up on the swings or on foot:
Tag. Football. Capture the flag. The kids
still looked like October in all their bright clothes.
They raced as if wind-chased, fast as he drove.

"November"

Poets are all too familiar with the tantalizing question: "Which of my poems will last?" Few ever really know, but in this book there are worthy

[2] TO THE BONE: New and Selected Poems, by *Sydney Lea.* University of Illinois Press. $29.95; $17.95.

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candidates for long life. Among the new poems one might nominate "The President of Flowers," an elegy, and "Night Message for Ted in the South." From earlier collections, "Sereno," in which a hesitating, philosophical hunter meditates in a duck blind, is a beautiful poem about wisdom and forgiveness. "For the Solitary" is significant for its resonant rhymes and metrical control. "For Faith" is a superior character study, and the dramatic monologue "Road Agent" is an example of the kind of poem Lea does best of all.

To the Bone is also significant because it reprints two formal narratives of middle length that deserve to be acknowledged as among the great poems of our time. In "The Feud," Lea never misses a beat in weaving a tale of ill-conceived revenge and bitter personal tragedy. The poem is so *right*, so utterly certain in its diction and phrasing, its order and pacing.

"The Blainville Testament," more complicated in its organization and more subtle in its lessons, is equally important. In it a city lawyer, an outsider come to practice law in the country, tells the story of a young man pinned beneath a dead cow, and his seventy-nine-year-old helper who goes for help. The old man never makes it, getting distracted by his need to rest, and the wide, natural world all around him that seems to reinforce his suspicion that the young man's fate is out of his hands. In the poem's most insightful moment the elderly woman, Elsie, corroborates this point of view. Though she owns the dead cow on top of the dead or dying boy, she talks the old man into staying on her porch for a second cup of tea and a chance to admire the view. Like so many of Lea's country characters, the old man wrestles with guilt born of action rather than its opposite. The man does go for help. He fails. Yet, he appears to us as more tragic, more humane, because even as he tries he knows he will fail. Insight into that terrible knowledge is Sydney Lea's special gift. The supple blank verse of these poems is marvelous, too, as convincing as real people saying living words to each other. Both poems ought to be required reading in every serious writing class and contemporary literature class in America.

If you are only up for another bland poetry read, then *Oils of Evening* is not for you.[3] G. E. Murray has created a mystery in verse, a cerebral whodunit in thirteen parts. It compares favorably to James Cummins' sonnet sequence involving the Perry Mason characters, *The Whole Truth.* But where Cummins' intention was largely satirical, Murray's is quite serious. *Oils of Evening* plays out in the world of high-stakes art collecting populated by insatiable buyers, thieves and forgers, and unscrupulous agents intent on closing deals and asking no questions. Embedded in the cinematic plot that drives the sequence (four stolen mid-eighteenth-century Dutch paintings—and one or two quality copies of each—continue to change hands on the market, further obscuring their

[3] OILS OF EVENING: Journeys in the Art Trade, by *G. E. Murray.* Lake Shore Publishing. $12.95p.

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origins and histories) is the author's preoccupation with art's relationship to those who experience it, or own it. Following Murray's meditations, one might conclude that art itself controls its audience and its custodial owners, manipulating both as they struggle unsuccessfully to unlock and master its secrets. Distorted perception becomes commonplace, leading to situations in which polished imitations replace the originals in distinguished collections.

This is not standard fare in contemporary American poetry. But our perception of art is a timely subject in this historical moment. It is timely because in poetry much of the mainstream commentary has degenerated into sound bite criticism—"She is our Yeats!" "He is our Dante, our Shakespeare!" This is canonization, not by accomplishment, but by proclamation and association. Most poets do listen to what the critics are saying, and many are accommodating, feeding the fat cats exactly what they want. Murray chooses the more difficult task of asking us to think more deeply about our motives, the lives we lead, and the good, bad, and bogus art in them.

Oils of Evening is enhanced by Murray's own line drawings. One depicts six individuals around a table inscribed with the words: *How to Invent Art. How to Use It.* Side by side, these are disturbing headings. They are indicative of the agitated state of mind provoked by this poem in which "The past awaits the impossible on demand," where "If memory believes before knowing remembers, / then light is time, and there are second chances."

After nine years, it is good to have Judith Baumel's second book in the world. The thirty poems in the emphatically titled *Now* are built on insights and language that follow long bouts of desperation. In many we share the narrator's resignation over lost friends and lost loves. There are vigils over the sick ("A Few Years Before the End," "Let Me In"), even over oneself. In "Only in New York," the narrator recalls giving birth in the city where everything goes wrong, and all of life is magnified to the point where the privileged, the forsaken, and the in-between lie down together. In "Get Up, Stand Up," Baumel meditates on the difficult journey through the physicality of love to spiritual calm and understanding:

> . . . One man
> I fed for years. Small and tight, born in the same season,
> he brought me this music, showed me the rebellion. He
> lives his little
> life still. Not too old. And the angel, ancient, has passed.

Baumel's strong imagery, brisk cadences, and clever internal rhymes are at their best in the beautiful "Lullabye After Nursing," in "And Boaz

[4] NOW, by *Judith Baumel.* Miami University Press. $10.95p.

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Begat Obed, and Obed Begat Jessie, and Jessie Begat David," and in "Lazarus," in which a horse can heal the ailments of other animals with a kiss. A collection of brave poems, *Now* deftly takes us through more difficult psychological terrain than we are used to crossing in contemporary poetry.

Spring Garden: New and Selected Poems by Fred Chappell includes selections from six previous volumes plus thirty new poems.[5] Chappell is an inventive formalist who can be funny and serious. "The Fated Lovers: A Story" is a superior sequence demonstrating this poet's range. Section seven, "A Glorious Twilight," especially stands out. In it a wife paints her nails, and the brilliant color she applies transforms the house. Special attention to a common activity turns life into art. The segment, and the poem as a whole, honors the subtlety and quiet drama of the stuff that makes up everyday life and binds us together.

Many of the characters Chappell writes about are not so much recognizable, living peers as individuals culled from old photograph albums, their lives evoked purely from an imaginative, refined sense of history rather than firsthand experience and observation. Yet they are quite alive, vital, and compelling. An exquisite case in point is "The Presences at Sunset." The poem, inspired by a Mary Anne Sloan etching, consists of eight rhymed couplets. Each couplet features a different speaker describing the figure in the etching. In this way the poet straddles two ladders of difficulty. He evokes the mysterious woman in the etching, giving her dimension and depth, and he demonstrates how different the observations of several people can be when they're describing and emotionally responding to a single object, or recorded moment in time.

> "Now she arrives, a weary penurious widow,
> Where shadow reigns, where all light is shadow."
>
> "A stand of alders guards the deep still pool.
> No stars, no moon. The lengthened hour grows cool."
>
> "Why does she come here? This water like dull slate
> Can hold no image of a human fate."
>
> "She comes because a half-lost memory
> Whispers to her like a distant sea."

Well edited and full of pleasant surprises, *Spring Garden* gives new readers and old the perfect opportunity to assess anew and admire Fred Chappell's verses.

Much the same might be said of the prolific Samuel Hazo and his new

[5] SPRING GARDEN: New and Selected Poems, by *Fred Chappell.* Louisiana State University Press. $24.95; $14.95.

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book, *The Holy Surprise of Right Now: Selected and New Poems.*[6] Hazo is a poet of unusually open sensibility. In many of his early poems he employs a supple pentameter and nearly flawless rhyme. Later, he gravitates to free verse where his strong imagery and experience in formal patterns serve him well. One might even discover an apt comparison between the energetic, technically gifted poet and one of his characters, the parachutist:

> twirling and suspended like a toy
> wind-swung and puppeted in space
> he pendulums sideways down the sky.

This volume includes poems about soldiering, travel, cars, love, family, work, weather, broken bones, harrowing trips to the dentist, bullfighting, and elegies for friends like John Ciardi. There are numerous instances of humor, as at the end of "Toasts for the Lost Lieutenants," and generosity, as in "For My Last Class of Freshmen." In our time many poets teach. Often they write about their jobs (and students) with odd rancor. Hazo, perhaps because he has done so many things in an interesting life, is a tonic when measured against the poet who never really gets off campus.

> There is no word for what I love in you,
> but it is sure, sacred and daily as bread.
> I speak by indirections of a world
> divisible as loaves among ourselves
> and multiplied like miracles because
> we share the private tables of the mind.
> We join in rites and sacraments that bind . . .

Hazo repeatedly offers delightful transitions. In "Song for the Flies of Fire," he moves from a litany of late century woes (Eldridge Cleaver, Nixon's cronies) to fireflies, "each one its own Prometheus, / a sun in flight, a type / of Edison." Tiring of negative spins, Hazo labors to find the good in everything. Readers searching for the elusive good in contemporary verse will be rewarded by a look into these pages.

Robert Pinsky's *The Figured Wheel: New and Collected Poems 1966–1996* illustrates that there are really two Pinskys in Robert Pinsky: the poet of formal control and lyric intelligence, and the poet of piled-on adjectives and long-lined lists.[7] The book gathers together new poems with liberal representations of his earlier collections. A closing section of translations is also added. The book is more loosely edited than the other

[6] THE HOLY SURPRISE OF RIGHT NOW: Selected and New Poems, by *Samuel Hazo.* The University of Arkansas Press. $38.00; $22.00.

[7] THE FIGURED WHEEL: New and Collected Poems 1966–1996, by *Robert Pinsky.* Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $30.00.

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retrospective volumes discussed here. The prose piece, "Jesus and Isolt," should have been left out, and so should the aforementioned translations. Even so, what is included makes clear that Pinsky's best work can be found in his debut *Sadness and Happiness*, a book of promise and energy, and *History of My Heart*, where one's suspicion that this poet writes best in traditional form, specifically in tercets, can be confirmed. Having once named himself ("Compulsive explainer that I am"), Pinsky is a listmaker preoccupied with history and process, with cataloguing what needs to be remembered, what must be passed on. Occasionally, we are given curious facts, as in "Shirt," where Pinsky catalogues the stations of the garment he is putting on:

> . . . The presser, the cutter,
> The wringer, the mangle. The needle, the union,
> The treadle, the bobbin. The code.

One cannot help but ask, "Why do we need this news?" But then Pinsky is also capable of naming "the snow charmed traffic" and describing how "The ground is warm to the child's cheek, and the wind is a humming sound in the grass above the draw." This writing is lovely.

When Pinsky moves in another direction, he prefers to dispense LEARNING in longer lines packed with adjectives. Such lines give the work an odd, arid quality, obscuring the point of view that necessitates the writing of the verse. This is the danger of overwriting, of choosing to follow, in this poet's case, Ginsberg and Ashbery rather than Wilbur or Justice. Nowhere is this danger more obvious than in the title poem of Pinsky's 1980 volume, *An Explanation of America*. Much of this poem is self-conscious in its structure, line breaks, and vocabulary. It reads today like a late-seventies prototype of poetry most favored by the academy. Much of the poem is in loose pentameter, yet it lacks a narrative line to sustain its length. One cannot overestimate the trouble this absence causes. There is no doubt that this poet is capable of saying things we need to hear, but of the two Robert Pinskys currently writing, it will be interesting to see which twin eventually wins out.

More and more American poets are thinking expansively, with regard to form and to theme and subject. The back cover copy of Louise Glück's first volume since winning the 1993 Pulitzer Prize is composed in this spirit, but it is somewhat misleading.[8] It speaks of "an astonishing book-length sequence" that "interweaves the dissolution of a contemporary marriage with the story of *The Odyssey*." Even in this age of relative definition, *Meadowlands* is *not* a book-length sequence. It is a collection of forty-six short, free verse poems. Some are spoken by Homer's timeless characters, and some are delivered by an unhappy contemporary woman extricating herself from the marriage already mentioned.

[8] MEADOWLANDS, by *Louise Glück*. The Ecco Press. $22.00.

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Nine of the poems are cast as parables, and in some of these Glück's best writing can be found:

> . . . On the muddy water
> they bickered awhile in the fading light,
> until the bickering grew
> slowly abstract, becoming
> part of their song
> after a little longer.
> "Parable of the Swans"

This is direct, imaginative. It earns the nugget of wisdom that comes at poem's end. But in many of the poems cast in the present, the narrator's complaints about her partner are so often predictable, the language is so flat, that an outsider's interest cannot be engaged. The *Odyssey* poems fare better, in part because the characters are already memorable. Glück's shrewd decision to appropriate them creates a depth and dramatic distancing not often achieved by confessional verses. Many of these are so successful, in fact, that one wishes the poet had called on Homer's cast to visit every poem in the book. The strategy of casting contemporary concerns in historical or classical literary terms is time-tested and honorable. But *Meadowlands* only goes part of the way in its commitment to such a plan. As a result, the book breaks down, its differently imagined blocks of poems warring against each other.

No such conflict troubles R. T. Smith's *Trespasser.*[9] A sample of titles from the Contents page—"Waterford," "Saint Patrick's," "Breves from *The Book of Kells*," "Wrenboys," "Poteen"—tells us where this book is grounded. But *Trespasser*, despite its self-effacing title, is not just another Yank-on-the-Emerald-Isle travelogue. Like the best American poets currently writing about that country, Smith is actually more convincing than many of the Irish poets, who are themselves trying desperately to become Americans or Continentals. He brings to the making of these thirty-seven poems polished, lyric phrasing and a highly developed sense of how to balance the various parts of each composition. He brings to his work the simple gift of clear-eyed observation:

> . . . Nevertheless,
> the blasphemous farm cat
> hungry for sacrament slinks
> up the ladder's rungs—his
> sepal eyes, thorns for claws,
> a rose petal for his pagan
> and ravenous tongue.
> "Angels"

[9] TRESPASSER, by *R. T. Smith.* Louisiana State University Press. $16.95; $9.95.

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This can only be written by a man who watches closely what goes on around him, who becomes part of the landscape and the people he conjures up in verse.

The book's last eleven poems make up a haunting sequence, "Gristle":

> No babe in the barn,
> Gristle rose in mannequin form
> from the Well of the Bitter,
> built his church
> of crickets, whin, and owl bones.
>
> The bog churned his black butter . . .
> His hymns were vinegar.
> "The Convert"

The focal point, a renegade monk, is as much animal and element as man. He is an appropriate symbol of Ireland's unique sense of Christianity, which has never fully shed its pagan roots and Druidic influence. That Smith so thoroughly understands the dense shadows of this history is impressive. That he can also evoke such subtleties in verse is extraordinary. Most of the sequence, in Smith's favorite thin, columnar stanzas, makes good use of internal and sporadic rhyme. ". . . the world's / music falls like rain / I will be love's gallows, / all sap and marrow, / mad laments of shadows / and a mouthful of birds / dying to sing," Smith concludes in "Gristle Epitaph." Many would argue that this is the essence of Irish spirituality and ambition. *Trespasser* is a sweet reminder of that lovely state of being.

John Burt gets credit here for the most cryptic book title. *Work without Hope* is, of course, not as bad as all that.[10] I was not familiar with Burt's work before reading for this chronicle, but I'll look forward to his new verse for its various technical gifts and intelligent, severe vision.

Many of the poems are narratives in blank verse, including the twenty-page centerpiece, "Anna Peterson." Constructed as monologues, dialogues, and epistolary addresses, these poems reflect a consistent effort to step outside oneself and enter the lives of others. The best of this group includes the spooky "Aboard the *Californian*," which takes place on the rescue ship that was late arriving at the scene of the *Titanic's* disaster, the companion pieces "Thomas Chaplin" and "Jim Slocum" (in the latter, a young couple unwittingly suffocate from exhaust fumes while they are parked for love), and the title poem, in which a drunken handyman comes to the door to rake leaves. Occasional rhymes are effective, and at its best, Burt's pentameter is quite good. But every so often he cleaves to the pattern, inserting words to fill out the metrical frame, as in the line "And serene as angels are, a rush of glitter . . . ,"

[10] WORK WITHOUT HOPE, by *John Burt*. The Johns Hopkins University Press. $16.95.

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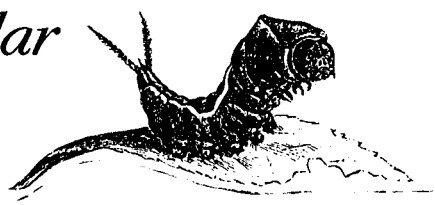
where *are* is undesirable, or the line "And then she knew just why he'd picked out her," where the inversion—*picked out her*—injures natural speech and the poem as a whole. The poet is also guilty on occasion of dropping a stress from a line—"she just couldn't run past all those lawns"; "The little girl wailing in her room"—presumably to introduce variety to his pattern. But this is unnecessary. Burt also tends to end some poems prematurely, stopping at a moment of high tension just before the good stuff really happens. These are drawbacks, certainly, but Burt more often than not rises above them. In the "Persephone" section of *Barren Season*, for example, he is capable of exquisite lyricism:

> River, river, who will come?
> Whom will you send to me?
> The leaves rain down, and all their shades
> Glide up and bend to me.

In the book's closing section, several sonnets combine to elevate *Work without Hope* to its most accomplished level. They also contribute to the remarkable revival of this form, comparing favorably to the recent superior sonnets of Felix Stefanile and Mark Jarman, among others.

The Blue Caterpillar and Other Essays



Sam Pickering

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ROBERT PHILLIPS

Assessing the New Formalism (So-Called)

A STORY HAS BEEN IN CIRCULATION FOR SOME TIME, corroborated in part by Frederick Feirstein and Frederick Turner's "Introduction" to *Expansive Poetry: Essays on the New Narrative & the New Formalism*, edited by Feirstein (Story Line Press, 1989), that what has come to be called the New Formalism began—doubtless on a dark and stormy night—early in 1987, when Feirstein, Turner, and Dick Allen met for the first time at the Minetta Tavern in Greenwich Village. The trio recognized themselves, according to the Introduction, as part of a distinct movement which was afoot, consisting of many others—others who were also committed to writing narrative poetry, and works in rhyme and meter. The pair speaks of recognizing other kindred voices crying in the wilderness (their words), those, for example, of Richard Moore, Charles Martin, Christopher Clausen, Robert McDowell, and Dana Gioia.

This is not how I recall the mid-1980s. Since the days of Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman, American poetry has seemed to be divided into two camps, call them what you will: the cooked and the raw, the left and the right, the conservative and the radical, the traditional and the experimental, the academics and the wildmen, the formalists and the free verse writers. The lines finally were drawn in 1960, when Donald Allen published his anthology, *The New American Poetry* (Grove Press), in response to Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson's "academic" *The New Poets of England and America* (Meridian, 1957), which the editors claimed defined a poetic generation. The poets included by Allen all had one common characteristic: they rejected those properties which typify Academic verse. From Helen Adam to Jonathan Williams, they followed the precepts of William Carlos Williams and some of those of Ezra Pound and practiced only free verse. ("Playing tennis without a net," Frost called it.) Allen in his "Preface" called his group "the true continuers of the modern movement in American poetry." To call them "Beat" poets would be too simplistic. Their number included poets associated with *Origin* magazine and *Black Mountain Review*; poets associated with the "San Francisco Renaissance"; the Beat generation; the "New York Poets"; and younger poets influenced by some or all of the preceding. Hall and Pack responded by publishing a second selection of *New Poets of England and America*. They cut no slack. All sixty-two poets, from Amis to Wain, were formalists and academic. Neither the editors'

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"Preface" nor the "Introduction" by Donald Hall deigned to allude to the Allen anthology.[1]

The rift continues to this day. In 1993 Eliot Weinberger published *American Poetry Since 1950: Innovators and Outsiders* (Marsilio Publishers), a 484-page anthology which gathered not only Beats and Black Mountain, New York School and San Francisco, but also the ethnopoetic poets (essentially an American version of French Surrealism). This was followed a year later by Paul Hoover's *Postmodern American Poetry* (surely a misleading title if ever there were one), which in 702 pages not only presented the previously mentioned "schools" or "movements," but also embraced the Projectivists, the Deep Image poets, the Language poets, and Performance Poetry. Such an anthology, from Charles Olson to Charles Bernstein, might be viewed as a useful survey of American avant-garde poetics since mid-century. To the contrary, some professors have adopted it as the sole text for survey courses in post-modern American poetry. A starred review in *Booklist* claimed the book is "destined to become a basic text in American poetry since 1950."

Balderdash. It is true that there were a couple of decades after Ginsberg's *Howl* when it appeared that the most radical poem one could write in America was a well-made sonnet. But formal poetry never went away, it was always with us. The generation of American formalists who influenced my own were still writing and publishing books: Auden, Lowell, Snodgrass, Wilbur, Shapiro, Jarrell, Schwartz, Roethke, Warren, Nemerov, Ciardi, Starbuck, Hecht, Hollander, Gardner, Howes, Bogan, William Jay Smith, Justice, Kennedy, Moss, Meredith, Swenson, Merrill, Kinnell, and Wagoner, to name some. For decades all the major literary prizes continued to go to poets of their kidney. When others, like James Wright, W. S. Merwin and Carolyn Kizer, defected from formalism, their early books remained in print and were influential. The problem with labelling today's academic poetry The New Formalism is that the old formalism never went away. Feirstein, Turner and Allen did not create a new literary genre or movement in the same way, say, that T. E. Hulme, Ezra Pound, H.D., John Gould Fletcher and Amy Lowell established the Imagist movement in 1909. (It petered out in 1917.)

There have been some earlier attempts to showcase recent formal poetry. Philip Dacey and David Jauss produced *Strong Measures: An Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry in Traditional Forms* (New York, 1986). To read *Strong Measures*, and certainly to attempt to teach from it, is an unhappy experience. To begin with, rather than choosing representative work from poets whose body of work is formal, the editors seemed to select those few formal poems written by poets who largely write free verse, poets like Jane Miller, Al Young, Frank O'Hara and

[1] In 1965, Paris Leary and Robert Kelly attempted to fuse the "new" poetry and the "traditional" in their anthology, *A Controversy of Poets* (Anchor Books). It is not an anthology which has stood the test of time: who today reads Robin Blaser, Melvin Walker La Follette, Gerrit Lansing, Edward Marshall, Georgia Lee McElhaney, or Ralph Pomeroy?

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Philip Levine. An anthology which proposed to celebrate "the renaissance of formal verse in contemporary America" paraded forth some 490 pages of pseudo-formal poetry (to borrow Dana Gioia's phrase). When a poet did not stick to a form, the work was labelled "nonce" or "hybrid." So we had "nonce couplets" in Ashbery and Bell, "nonce sonnets" (with variable meter and rhyme scheme) from Berryman and Rukeyser, and so forth. Other forms were called "normative," as in Hayden Carruth's "normative syllabic verse." Harold Witt's alternating quatrains made highly irregular use of rhyme. Gary Snyder's haiku was a syllable short in the third line, and Judith Johnson Sherwin's English sonnet had no rhymes in the first quatrain. Another problem with the book was that it contained work by several generations. If this represented "Contemporary American Poetry," where did it begin and end? Berryman and Bishop were cheek-by-jowl with Alberto Rios and Michael Ryan.

Annie Finch's *A Formal Feeling Comes* (Story Line, 1994) is fine as far as it goes, but it only includes poems in form by contemporary women. On the other hand, Robert Richman's *The Direction of Poetry: An Anthology of Rhymed and Metered Verse Written in the English Language since 1975* (Houghton Mifflin, 1988) includes many British poets as well as Americans. Since when did the Brits ever drop formalism? The book also includes poets as old as Stanley Kunitz (b. 1905) and as young as Rosanna Warren (b. 1954). Richman is correct in excluding Amy Clampitt, however. While many have included Clampitt as a formalist poet, she rarely wrote metrically. And then there was David Lehman's *Ecstatic Occasions, Expedient Forms* (Macmillan, 1987). Again, we were given a book which blurred distinctions between generations and forms.

So finally we have *Rebel Angels: 25 Poets of the New Formalism.*[2] The editors have gotten a lot of things right: It is, first of all, a generational book. All poets collected were born since 1940. The poets also are culturally diverse, with Elizabeth Alexander, Julia Alvarez, Rafael Campo, Marilyn Nelson (formerly Marilyn Nelson Waniek) represented. There is a mixture of academics and non-academics—eight of the twenty-five poets do something other than teach creative writing for a living. (As opposed to Dave Smith and David Bottoms' *The Morrow Anthology of Younger American Poets* [Quill, 1985], in which only seven of the 104 poets did not teach.)

Moreover, the editors of *Rebel Angels* have given us a generous representation of each poet's work. Some—Tom Disch, Gioia, Emily Grosholz, R. S. Gwynn, Marilyn Hacker, Andrew Hudgins, Charles Martin, Molly Peacock, Wyatt Prunty, and Timothy Steele—are represented by seven poems each. The book is prefaced by a balanced overview of the new formalism, giving a summary of its development and

[2] REBEL ANGELS: 25 Poets of the New Formalism, ed. by *Mark Jarman* and *David Mason*. Story Line Press. $25.00; $12.00.

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reception, including an account of the notorious attack upon formal poets by Diane Wakoski in *American Book Review* (May-June 1986), in which she seriously referred to John Hollander as "Satan"! The editors also defend their choice to call this development in recent American poetry "New Formalism" rather than "Expansive Poetry," a term preferred by Turner and Feirstein in their critical anthology, presumably because it could embrace the parallel development of new long narrative poems in verse, such as Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate* (1986), Andrew Hudgins' *After the Lost War* (1988), and Nicholas Christopher's *Desperate Characters* (1988), etc. And the book concludes with some very useful apparatus—an alphabetical Index of each form included, a Bibliography for further reading (curiously omitting any of the helpful essays on the new formalism by Robert McPhillips), and Notes on the Contributors, some of which run as long as eight lines apiece.

So much for format and apparatus. What do the poems themselves tell us about the new formalism? First off, that this generation no longer holds that there are certain subjects which are appropriate to lyric poetry, others which are not. An earlier generation of formal poets—Léonie Adams, Elinor Wylie, Sara Teasdale, Marya Zaturenska—clearly felt lyrical poetry should be about Elevated Things. The work was also full of conventional images—roses, fountains, nymphs and the like. These have been displaced by imagery of the most rude kind. Among the images and subjects one encounters in these pages are herpes, psoriasis, hepatitis, melanoma, hemorrhoids, pimples, cancer, mastectomies, chemotherapy, mammograms, carcinoma, cunnilingus, faked orgasms, and stolen credit cards. Training bras are mentioned by two poets (though I never knew exactly for what the wearers were training). "Tumor" is rhymed with "humor," and "shtupping" has become a proper verb. Fortunately, there are only a few poems on teaching.

If certain readers associate modern formal verse with light verse, they now must think again. The humor here is gallows humor. The poets are unabashedly modern. Take some of the titles: "Have You Ever Faked an Orgasm?" (Peacock), "The Rapist Villanelle" (Disch), "Body Bags" (Gwynn), "Cancer Winter" (Hacker), "Post-Coitum Tristesse: A Sonnet" (Brad Leithauser), "Satyr, Cunnilinguent: To Herman Melville" (Martin), "Eros" (Steele), etc. It was only a couple of decades ago that readers and many poets flinched at the subjects and titles of some of Anne Sexton's work. While Lowell and Snodgrass gave their confessional poems decorous titles, Sexton called hers "In Celebration of My Uterus," "Buying the Whore," "Menstruation at Forty," and "The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator." Now anything goes, and St. Anne must be smiling from her grave. This is one of the things that *is* new about the new formalism—the fusion of earthy subjects with the unearthly lyric impulse.

I'm happy to report that, unlike the Dacey and Jauss book, most of the poems labelled as formal adhere to prescribed prosody. I do take

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exception to certain lapses. The following, by Leithauser, is included under the label "monosyllabic sonnet":

Why
do
you
sigh,
roar,
fall,
all
for
some
hum-
drum
come
—mm?
Hm . . .

A "monosyllabic sonnet" seems to me to be an oxymoron—like "military intelligence" or "giant shrimp." A sonnet, as everyone knows, whether Petrarchan, English, or Spenserian, is normally a poem of fourteen iambic pentameter lines, not fourteen words. Furthermore, it is normally divided into an octave and a sestet. If we take Leithauser's poem to be a sonnet, it breaks between the words "for" and "some"—scarcely a division between a theme in the octave and its exemplification, reflection or resolution in the sestet. (Does this make it a Miltonic sonnet, with no customary break at the start of the sestet? I think not.) I know, I know, Milton even invented the tailed sonnet, running to twenty lines, of which the additional six were called the tail. But even so . . . And I haven't mentioned the obvious: Shouldn't a proper sonnet be written in iambic pentameter? Mr. Leithauser's "monosyllabic sonnet" falls a tad short, shall we say.

Through the centuries we've taken liberties with the sonnet form. Wordsworth used an occasional a-c-c-a rhyme in the second quatrain. Hopkins, springing his sprung rhythm upon us, had eight stresses to a line. Elinor Wylie wrote sonnets in tetrameters and called them "Little Sonnets." In "The Silken Tent" Robert Frost spun a sonnet from a single sentence. But these were, nevertheless, sonnets. The inclusion of the Leithauser bastard form is but one of a number of editorial mistakes or lapses in judgment. Others include Julia Alvarez's "hybrid sonnets" with deviant rhymes (live/psycholanalyzed). Mary Jo Salter's 9-line poem is called a "curtal sonnet," as is Wyatt Prunty's 8-line "Insomnia." At least Prunty's reads like an octave in search of a sestet. Molly Peacock's "The Wheel" is presented as a "Double Sonnet," yet consists of 29 lines, not 28. Peacock's English sonnet, "Desire," is highly irregular in meter. Another poem is called an "Exploded Sonnet," because it runs to 16 lines. Does this mean we can look forward to Exploded Haiku? Rachel

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Wetzsteon, one of the least impressive talents on display, writes Songs in octets, sestets, and coupled sestets—but employs the most obvious June/moon rhymes—"Shackles/cackles," "Staler/jailer," "church/lurch," "ring/thing," "make/fake." On her precedent Snoop Doggy Dog would be a clear shoo-in for the next Poet Laureate of the U.S. Elizabeth Alexander's quatrains also are very undistinguished, with two out of three poems reading like hip-hop poetry, full of street language and brand names.

Some of the book's highlights are Mary Jo Salter's blank verse narrative, "Frost at Midnight," Wyatt Prunty's "A Note of Thanks" in iambic pentameter, Charles Martin's "hybrid sonnet" called "Easter Sunday, 1985," Paul Lake's blank verse poem on a blue jay, Marilyn Hacker's stunning sequence of Italian sonnets, "Cancer Winter," and several by R. S. Gwynn, including "The Drive-In," which concludes,

> As on the glass a veil of frost
> Obscures this childhood I have lost.
> The show is over. Time descends.
> And no one tells me how it ends.

Gwynn also has a frolic lifting famous lines from *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* and placing them one after another, somehow having it all turn out in iambic pentameter and rhymed quatrains (in "Approaching a Significant Birthday, He Peruses *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*"). Auden could not have been more dexterous. Tom Disch has two excellent villanelles on fresh and unexpected topics. Bruce Bawer, at this point better known as a critic and essayist than a poet, is revealed to possess a fine lyric voice. All three poems by which he is represented are first-rate. Here's one, an English sonnet:

> The View from an Airplane at Night,
> Over California
>
> This is a sight that Wordsworth never knew,
> whether looking down from mountain, bridge, or hill:
> An endless field of lights, white, orange, and blue,
> as small and bright as stars, and nearly still,
> but moving slowly, many miles below,
> in blackness, as stars crawl across the skies,
> and ranked in rows that stars will never know,
> like beads strung on a thousand latticed ties.
> Would even Wordsworth, seeing what I see,
> know that these lights are not well-ordered stars
> that have been here a near-eternity,
> but houses, streetlamps, factories, and cars?

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> Or has this slim craft made too high a leap
> above it all, and is the dark too deep?

A better known poet, also a critic-essayist, is Dana Gioia. I'm not entirely sure Gioia is best served by this selection. His "Lives of the Great Composers" (in a fugue form of his own invention, suggested, he once said in a footnote, by a poem of Weldon Kees), is surprising and bears continual rereading. But where are "The Man in the Open Doorway," "The Next Poem," and "All Souls'"? Emily Grosholz also is not given her due by this particular selection. The editors chose some of her least pyrotechnical verse. One misses poems like "West Wind II," with its wonderful slant rhymes ("hard/immured," "brief/life").

And while anthologists in the past have gone too far the other way—Oscar Williams and Louis Untermeyer filling their books not only with their own poems, but the poems of their wives (Jean Derwood and Jean Starr Untermeyer) as well—the present editors were too modest in not including a soupçon of their own work in the genre. One misses Mason's "Three Characters from a Lost Home" and "The Summer of Love," as well as Jarman's series of "Unholy Sonnets." One also misses work by Henri Cole, Martha Collins, Edward Hirsch, Karl Kirchwey, J. D. McClatchy, Elise Paschen, Robert Pinsky, Richard Foerster, Robert B. Shaw, R. L. Barth, Jacki Butler, Melissa Green, Vikram Seth, Norman Williams, and William Logan. (Dick Allen missed inclusion by one year, I assume, being born in 1939.)

But this is the game one can play endlessly with any anthology. One must accept that the selection is but one from endless possibilities. The fact remains that *Rebel Angels* is the first truly representative anthology of the poets said to form a generation of new formalists. Purists may argue about some of the prosody, as I have, but it is a solid contribution to a somewhat unexpected movement among younger practitioners of recent American poetry.

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HAROLD FROMM

Telling Stories About the Bartrams

SO ENTRENCHED ARE THE CLICHÉS OF POSTMODERNISM that not even biography has been able to escape them, witness this curious new book by Thomas P. Slaughter, *The Natures of John and William Bartram*,[1] which the author prefers to regard as a "story." So of course one wants to know whether Slaughter is simply "giving us a story" or whether in some sense or other this book is the real authentic thing. If it's not the real authentic thing, then it's tempting to ask why we are reading it in the first place as an account of the Bartrams. And if it is the real authentic thing, then presumably it's somewhat more than just a story. Postmodernism's false humility will drive us nuts yet.

Of course, narrative perspectivism has been the rage for some time now, the seemingly modest view that everything is a version, an interpretation, of a thing-in-itself that can't be known—that the act of knowing is itself corrosive and partisan, an already-interpreted, a "story." Fair enough. If the natural world of materiality can't be known "in itself," then how much more implausible would be the claim that amorphous human affairs have a recoverable essence (or even an irrecoverable one). But if there are no facts, if we are all of us speaking the already-interpreted, then what's the point of making a big deal about it, as though one's own case were unique? It is this intrusion of self as knowing subject, assertively rationalized as a positive virtue several times over in the course of his narrative, that gives Slaughter's biography the somewhat sanctimonious aura of having crashed through the iron gates of life.

The Introduction begins reasonably enough:

> John (1699–1777) and William (1739–1823) Bartram, father and son, were the leading American horticulturalists of their time. John was a traveler, gardener, herbalist, botanist, author, and purveyor of plants. He was a founding member of the American Philosophical Society and in 1765 George III appointed him botanist for Britain's North American colonies. John was a "philosopher" of nature . . . [i.e.] a scientist and an enquirer into the meanings of life as revealed by the natural world. . . .
>
> William Bartram was the first native-born American to devote his

[1] THE NATURES OF JOHN AND WILLIAM BARTRAM, by *Thomas P. Slaughter.* Alfred A. Knopf. $27.50.

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> entire life to the study of nature. . . . Bartram's *Travels* inspired the poetry of Coleridge, Wordsworth, and other Romantics, who drew images directly from the book. . . .

Slaughter, however, is not content to continue in this sensible and informative vein. Rather, he now embarks on a series of grandiose claims: his book will be not only about Nature but about the "natures" of the Bartrams, about their "imaginative construction of nature," an exploration of interiors rather than exteriors. In sum, this book sets out to do what we normally expect of any competent biography: to tell us about the psychological workings of its subject(s). But Slaughter also needs to spell out the connection "between this project and me. The use of first-person paraphrasing throughout the book suggests how closely my life, consciousness, and nature are entwined with my interpretation of the Bartrams." And ought we to be shocked—or just bored—when we learn that "the sources listed in the Notes are filtered through my life; they have no independent standing as evidence apart from my understanding of them"? Is this a radical insight or a stupefying banality? Perhaps all that is shocking here is that anyone would venture to say it. Is there some other way of apprehending sources (or anything else) without running them through an understanding consciousness?

Slaughter's narcissism and pretentiousness are relentless: "More self-revelation is called for here. . . . I offer this information with some trepidation, recognizing that both the act and the content risk providing ammunition for overdetermined readings of my epistemology and of who I am." And who is he? "I'm a Quaker. I'm a mix of Native-American, French-Canadian, and English heritages. I'm a father and, in common with all of my gender, I've been a son." But there's more:

> This project crystallized in my consciousness during a year in which my father died and my son was born. Before I started writing, my maternal grandfather died and my mother died, too. Halfway through a first draft, my daughter was born. Days after I completed the last chapter, before I wrote the conclusion, my good friend and dog, Willie, died, ending a companionship of thirteen years. If death and life stalk these pages together, if the book combines melancholy with a seemingly inexplicable good cheer, that's because such emotions contribute to who I am and thus . . . to what the book is as well.

After an introduction as soppy as this, Slaughter's book can only seem an anticlimax. I lament that portentous day when Stephen Greenblatt found himself seated next to a basket case on his flight from Baltimore to Boston (see the Epilogue to *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*) who asked him to mouth the words, "I want to die." Academia has not been the same since, as the flood of self-revelation and autobiographical schmoozing has miscegenated with what used to be thought of as scholarship to produce an unholy mess of good feeling about oneself.

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Because he knows a lot, is the editor of the admirable new edition of William Bartram in The Library of America, and writes an uncluttered, easygoing prose, the program of storytelling that Slaughter has set for himself does not completely undermine his biography of the Bartrams. But the book labors under some pretty heavy weights. Besides his Brechtian agenda of reminding us that he is only telling a story ("so the story I tell . . . "), there is his repeated speculation about what was going on in the psyches of his subjects: "Why couldn't he write? This man with a poet's heart, an artist's paintbrush, a novelist's quill, couldn't express himself. The pen sputtered, the words stuttered, the hand stopped. What tortures us so besides love and the pain of love lost? What drove him away? Was it her, was it him? Why didn't he succumb, pursue? Why didn't he jump into the snake's mouth, consume the moth with his flame? Was he really better than Adam, a less natural man?" A little of this goes a long way.

But Slaughter's self-absorption is only one of the elements that cause this book to be already dated, fixed in the narrowly time-bound episteme of the 1990s in which the narrator's cup of multicultural virtue runneth over: "Indians killed John Bartram's father. That's enough to explain the hatred that ran against his grain, a bigotry that he shared with those of his countrymen who had a less personal cause for their racism. . . . [Bartram] had deep psychological scars, crippling blows to his compassion, and searing burns that blinded him to the positive qualities of Native-Americans. The pain of his father's death prevented John from seeing Indians as individuals as well as members of diverse groups, from ever admiring the qualities that made 'them' different from 'us.' " And for Slaughter, Bartram is guilty of sexism as well, responding to Indian girls as "nymphs" with skin too dark and sexuality too wanton and questioning the virility of Indian males because of their lack of such Eurocentric virtues as "honor, courage, justice, mercy, and paternalism." And then there was the matter of slavery. "Where was his compassion, his empathy? Where was his rage at a labor system that was so cruel, so unjust?" Slaughter spends several pages castigating both Bartrams as men who "bought, sold, and owned more than one" slave, who didn't believe in educating them, and who, indeed, wrote little about them, which in itself he finds very damning. "The silence speaks volumes." Yet it is hard to read these pages without feeling how cheaply bought such ex post facto moral one-upmanship really is, if one grants that people live in time and cannot fairly be judged in the light of eternal values, especially in an era like ours when eternal values are in disrepute as white, male, and Eurocentric, like Bartram's view of Indian masculinity.

Slaughter's theme is to contrast the natures of John Bartram, father, and William Bartram, son, and to record the conflicts between them that arrested William's independent development as a travel writer of formidable perceptions and a very skilled draughtsman of nature (a number of beautiful drawings are reproduced throughout and the

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book's jacket and design are outstanding, a tribute to Knopf's production staff). John was a quantitative scientist of nature, a Quaker who disbelieved in the divinity of Christ, a horticulturalist who sold seeds both here and abroad, and a naturalist who experienced animals and plants as sharers of a universal intellect, which did not necessarily place human beings at the top of creation. In some respects, then, he can be seen as a precursor of today's animal rights movement. Still, for all its aesthetic appeal, he saw nature as primarily useful to mankind, though Slaughter regards Bartram as an early aesthetician of natural beauty. William, whose ultimate career was temporarily deflected in youth by the practical concerns of his father, which nonetheless drove him into impractical farming and rice-growing schemes that all ended badly, came into his own after John's death. Unlike his father's, William's response to nature was animated more by feeling than by Baconian practicality, inclining toward sentimentality and compassion rather than precise measurement. These temperamental differences, as well as William's financial dependence on John's largesse, drive the story that Slaughter relates. Although he sifts a good deal of information from journals and letters, to flesh out his version of the psychodynamics of their relationship, Slaughter is impelled to do a lot of imaginative improvising: "How did it feel to come home? Not a word from John or William about the arrival or how the summer passed with Billy again in the house. What was his welcome home like? He surely was missed and worried over; but why didn't he write, send plants, let them know that he was alive? There must have been some anger, resentment at least, about how Billy had acted toward his family." These musings do not always work out well and Slaughter is forced into a good deal of repetition to keep his themes aloft, a repetition, unfortunately, that too often takes the place of substance. So that for all its command of the materials, this "story" too often comes across as thin and highly "managed."

William Bartram's *Travels* (its full title is very long) was carefully wrought and rewrought from the journals meticulously recorded during several years of adventures in the eastern part of the country, starting in 1773 and ending a year after Independence. The book was not published until 1791 (Bartram was born in 1739 and died in 1823) and when it finally did appear, the reception was far from warm. About 400 pages long in the Library of America edition, the *Travels* consist of very densely described observations of nature, descriptions of meetings with Indians, and experiences with wildlife, most famously some harrowing encounters with alligators. The prose, though in the main accomplished and artful, conjoins a somewhat inharmonious range of styles, from tiresome clichés of eighteenth-century diction ("The glorious sovereign of day, clothed in light refulgent, rolling on his gilded chariot, hastened to revisit the western realms. Grey pensive eve now admonished us of gloomy night's hasty approach" etc. etc.), through formulaic adulations of the Creator, to vigorously inscribed personal impressions: "The chief is a tall well made man, very affable and cheerful, about sixty years of

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age, his eyes lively and full of fire, his countenance manly and placid, yet ferocious, or what we call savage, his nose aquiline, his dress extremely simple, but his head trimmed and ornamented in the true Creek mode. [His slaves] were dressed better than he, and served and waited on him with signs of the most abject fear." The overall style (though often hyperbolic and romantic) is the easygoing narrative mode of eighteenth-century travel literature, nowadays probably most familiar from *The Life of Olaudah Equiano* and, of course, classically parodied in *Gulliver's Travels*. For today's reader, Bartram's *Travels* would require sensitive abridgement to reduce the overwhelmingly detailed descriptions of plants and their leaves, topography, and wildlife, whose verbal overkill seems likely to oppress (as indeed it did some of Bartram's contemporaries) even the most insatiable nature fans, who would probably prefer to watch PBS and the Discovery Channel.

Slaughter warns us of the inaccuracies of the *Travels*, their truthfulness to feeling rather than fact, their unsuccessful struggle to appear scientific. "The emotion that William sought in these exaggerated counts was the sublime, which could be a product of size, number, variety, height, sound, beauty, or fear. Willing, indeed eager, to sacrifice mere numbers for emotional truth, he drew on the aesthetic theory that he'd been exposed to in school, of Joseph Addison, Lord Kames, William Hogarth, and Edmund Burke." Bartram's melancholy, depression, and dark view of human beings increased with age; and in the years after the *Travels*, he looked for Western mankind to transcend its egoism and regard other ethnicities and species as equals. But although he gave up his own slaves late in life, he never had as high an estimate of blacks as he did of the Indians who offered him hospitality on his travels.

Interesting as much of Slaughter's material may be, any hope that the author's ego would be sufficiently stroked by his autobiographical Introduction proves to be vain. The Conclusion and Afterword are determined to clobber us yet again. Speaking of his own little son Moses, busy playing with violent toys instead of respecting the personhood of "others," Slaughter writes: "My hopes and fears for him share much with John's for his sons. I want to protect Moses from the snakes of our world, to teach him a reverence for all living things, no less than for himself." And in a final burst of righteousness, he concludes, "When we 'other' on the basis of species, race, gender, or class, we create caste systems that protect us from and desensitize us to the suffering that we foment and tolerate, isolating us from the natural community of which we are a part." Why do I experience this—and similar passages in other books by similar mentalities—as just the phony benevolence of yet another self-absorbed academic Jeremiah wallowing in institutionally-subsidized pseudo-virtue? Do we really need this sort of shopworn lecture when we settle down to read a biography of the Bartrams, or anyone else? Do we need a William Bennett of the left? In peddling such threadbare homilies, just who does Slaughter figure his audience to be? It can't be me, because like him I'm already perfect.

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THOMAS FILBIN

Familiar Capability

WHILE FIRST NOVELS OFTEN BURST with literary energy and the raw emotion franchised to the young, the writing game demands other qualifications if the successful novice is to make it a vocation. Producing an interesting book every few years requires self-sharpening powers of insight, an inventory of questions about the human condition, and seriously established work habits. This is not to deny that even the immortals had dry seasons and ignition failures; Zola wrote masterpieces like *L'Assommoir* and *The Debacle*, but he penned his share of duds, too. Try *The Sin of Father Mouret* for soppy sentiment, a weep through the woods that goes wrong from the very beginning. But lapses aside, writers can usually tell when they've tapped into the vein. As discouraging as any first draft must be, with its shortcomings before rewrite strutting about like bad actors in audition, a familiar capability noticeable in a day's rushes can overcome the fear of failure. Some recent fiction by six older writers (the youngest is fifty and the oldest nearly seventy) showcases the talents of people who wrote well at the beginning of their careers and then continued on to write better. Like veteran baseball players, scribblers often get a second wind, savoir-faire and self-confidence making up for any loss in speed.

Joan Didion's latest novel[1] follows the shadowy excesses of American foreign policy in Central America in the 1980s, where the truth was, of course, far stranger than fiction. Even Tom Clancy would not have invented the Iran-Contra affair, or someone as wildly improbable as Oliver North, who considered himself heroic, religious, and patriotic all the time he subverted the law. A man whose principles allow him to behave as if he had none would have left Émile salivating as he scurried for his pen.

Didion's opening to the book reflects on the fast times of the 1980s, the internationalization and valorization of everything. "For a while we felt rich and then we didn't . . . time was money . . . Get the big suite, the multi-line telephones . . . download all data. Uplink Prague, get some conference calls going . . . work the management plays . . . nod out on the noise."

The frenetic pace of the deal, and everyone had a deal, charged the atmosphere then. But the international intrigues were found out and the stock market tanked; prosperity hadn't dry paint before it went

[1] THE LAST THING HE WANTED, by *Joan Didion*. Alfred A. Knopf. $23.00.

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staggering into Chapter Eleven. Didion's dead-on prose captures the tension and treachery from the first moment.

The book's subject, Elena McMahon, is a political journalist covering the 1984 presidential campaign who leaves her job to go to Florida where her father, a semi-retired arms dealer, is dying. He stands ready to make a fortune on one last shipment, and Elena takes his place aboard the private aircraft ostensibly carrying auto parts to Costa Rica. The plane arrives instead on an unnamed island in the Caribbean and delivers the weapons, but she is left cooling her heels for payment. She stays on the island and falls blindly into a web that includes mysterious middlemen and an American diplomat named Treat Morrison.

Told with deep breaths in a chiaroscuro style, the tale focuses on Elena's emotions and perceptions which stand in sharp contrast to the doublespeak and obliteration of facts practiced by everyone else. Governments are fronts, foreign policy is covert, and there is a mountain of greenbacks in play. Elena's inevitable murder suggests that the individual is unable to compete against a syndicate of corporate and governmental wickedness. Villains used to work free lance and ride into town alone, now they have a company car, forged passports, a gold card, lawyers, guns, and money.

Didion grasps the deceptions of language practiced by the official spokesperson, who uses words not to reveal and clarify, but to distract and obscure. "Conflict resolution," "incident prevention," and "the events in question" substitute for counterinsurgency, illegal intervention, and assassination. Writing like this drags truth out onto the stage with lighting effects that force us to consider the horror of using reason to justify its opposite.

The English and the French have had a millennium of shared history since the Norman Conquest. One could say the English never got over it. The language of court was French for several centuries, and England being an island, seeing what the wider world was doing meant only looking across the Channel. France became both the land of freedom and the home of horrors. Everything from their revolution to their morals was sermonized upon, and the pejorative of anything was constructed by connecting it to the word "French," as in "French leave," "French letters," and "the French pox." France stood synonymous with depravity, looseness, and a place one went to wallow in what was forbidden in England. The French response was a sleepy Gallic eye and a shrug. They did not think themselves perverted for allowing things that were only a part of life. The English were the perverts; who else would ban something at home and then travel so far to indulge a prurient interest in it?

Julian Barnes has written a collection of short stories[2] about the English experience in France, and they are charming, brilliant, and sui

[2] CROSS CHANNEL, by *Julian Barnes*. Alfred A. Knopf. $21.00.

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generis. "Dragons" chronicles English mercenaries engaged to suppress Protestants in the seventeenth century, while "Junction" portrays the daily lives of the five thousand English laborers brought over in 1841 to build the Paris to Rouen rail line. In "Interference," an elderly English composer named Leonard Verity, long resident in a small village in Picardy, is dying, and down to his last gasp he inflicts disdain on everyone, including his life companion Adeline whom he refuses to marry because it would be a betrayal of his ideals. Cold, unfeeling, and isolated in his old age, he imprisons her in his fortress of resistance to everything that is not to his standard of perfection. "For Adeline the artistic life had begun in gregariousness and warmth; now it was ending in solitude and austerity."

"Hermitage" is the cleverest and warmest story in the lot by virtue of its ingenious and masterful exposition of social relations and personal attachments. Two English women who purchase a working chateau and winery draw closer to one another as they grow more fond of the earth that yields their lovely grapes. The 1890s setting with its attendant circumlocutions and silences allows it to succeed by brilliant subtlety in creating a love story, a wine story, and a social drama simultaneously. Julian Barnes's first novel *Metroland* was a memorable debut, written against a backdrop of a young man's France, and it bears a reading in connection with these stories. Unrepentant Francophiles have found their Moses.

Penelope Lively is as established as a British writer can be, having won the Booker Prize in 1987. Her latest novel[3] takes place in a rural village in the middle of England, hours from the London of work and social obligations. Pauline, a fifty-five-year-old divorced free-lance book editor, has half a house, her daughter Teresa and son-in-law Maurice have the other half. Pauline enjoys a kind of relationship with Hugh, a rare book dealer in London who is unhappily married. Pauline and Hugh had sex for a while, but at their age it seems not worth the bother; instead they dine, talk, and remain the best of friends. Pauline derives a God-like pleasure from correcting other people's work, and has a tempered edge of sadness from her former marriage to the philandering father of Teresa, a globetrotting academic always on the make for the next conference or free woman. She dislikes Maurice both for himself and for the unhappiness he is causing Teresa.

> Maurice's egotism is not overly apparent. He is not conspicuously self-absorbed. . . . Maurice's egotism is the more subtle version—that of implacable purpose . . . he practices a system of relentless manipulation. All those in his orbit do what Maurice requires that they should do, to the greater convenience of Maurice.

[3] HEAT WAVE, by *Penelope Lively*. HarperCollins. $22.00.

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When Pauline guesses he is having an affair with the girlfriend of his editor, her contempt for him, as well as her inability to talk to Teresa, grows. The evasions and jealousies of this family under pressure are artfully drawn in a style that is, while not wildly dramatic, nonetheless so deft and intelligent that fireworks aren't necessary. The only flaw is an unexpected violent death for Maurice, but despite this too easy exit for a nettlesome character, the book still beguiles with its quiet grace and insight into motivation and behavior.

In a collection of short stories[4] devoted to the immigrant experience, Natalie Petesch has hit the chord of realism solidly from the book's dedication: "For those immigrants who did not go on to the great universities of America, who did not become bankers, lawyers, businessmen, authors, artists, physicians, scientists, and Nobel Laureates, but who, like my mother, came, labored in misery, cold, and darkness, and perished unknown." As bleak as this sounds, the stories themselves, while somber, are not bitter or depressing. She manages to find a tender redemptive force in the lives of these new Americans, a tremendous wager on hope by millions for whom an unheated room and a seventy-hour work week were still better than what they left behind.

"The Immigrant Train" tells of fourteen-year-old Stasio who treks on his own through Poland to Bremen for a boat to New York. After Ellis Island he is determined to make it to a lumber camp in Minnesota, but finds himself only as far as Philadelphia where he is introduced to hustling his way on the streets by a newsboy named Gem who takes Stasio under his wing as an apprentice. The fascination and ease of city life seduces him, and soon he is selling papers, shortchanging customers when they don't notice it, and running out to buy cocaine for the women in the red light district. Inside this suddenly hardened young man, however, spring forth sudden bursts of longing, such as for the soft nibble at his hand by his horse's mouth for a bite of carrot.

In "The Beekeeper," a farm boy named Stefan is packed off to America to earn money, but the mills of Pittsburgh where he labors by the light of the blast furnace are only a painful reminder of the fields of home. He decides he will set up several beehives in his city apartment on the top floor for the pleasure of caring for them and listening to their buzzing. When he buys a precious queen, he carries her back to his apartment under his shirt in a mesh cage. "His one concern in moving the queen into her new home was that she might somehow escape his fingers which seemed to have grown thick and stupid from his work in the mill, and vanish from his sight forever, straight out of the skylight he had built for her—a small piece of the sky meant solely for her beatitudes."

When a prospective bride comes to his flat and sees the hives, she is horrified and ridicules him as a hopeless dreamer. She leaves him and

[4] THE IMMIGRANT TRAIN AND OTHER STORIES, by *Natalie L.M. Petesch.* Swallow Train/Ohio University Press. $24.95; $14.95.

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when the hives are stricken by disease and the bees die, Stefan resigns himself to the work of the world, becomes a reasonably prosperous businessman and marries an American-born girl. In middle age he suddenly takes up music lessons, playing the flute because its lower register notes produce a sound not unlike the swarming hum of bees.

Petesch's stories succeed wonderfully as miniatures in biography, and with America once again a nation of immigrants, this book is both timely and timeless.

A familiar name in Japan, the author of twenty novels, Akira Yoshimura's first work[5] translated into English concerns itself with the medieval period in that country. It is a world not unlike what we know of Europe at the same time; aside from royalty, nobility, and a small merchant class, most people are peasants and serfs locked in a daily struggle for existence with a tiny plot of land or a place to fish. So poor are they that in one village it becomes the practice to sell oneself into indentured servitude as a way to feed a family. Isaku, a nine-year-old boy whose father has done so, is suddenly left to take on the duties of manhood and help his mother. Season by season the book carries the reader through the next three years. The villagers scratch out a living while holding a great hope that a merchant shipwreck, an "O-fune-sama" would occur. When fate on its own account does not provide this, fate can be prodded. The villagers have a trick; they build fires to boil ocean water for the salt which they sell, but the flames attract ships in trouble and they founder in storms on the coastal reefs. It is a brutal business; if a ship is drawn in, the villagers will kill the crew, take cargo, break up the vessel for lumber and firewood, and then hide all traces lest they be caught and punished.

Yoshimura tackles the subject with a spare, reductive style that reflects the harshness of the surroundings. "The reddish color on the far ridges disappeared, and the leaves on the slope behind the village faded fast. The temperature dropped day by day. On windy days great clouds of dry leaves swirled into the air from among the rocks and fell onto the village path or the roofs of the houses. Many were blown far out to sea."

After a few shipwrecks, a temporary prosperity returns. Another craft appears, but when it is boarded it reveals a dead crew, their skin broken out with pustules and rashes; it is a castaway filled with smallpox victims. The village itself is soon stricken when the disease breaks out. Some regard it as a condemnation for their misdeeds, while others resign themselves to the utter game of chance that living and dying play with them.

This book has no happy resolutions, and for this reason I think it took mettle to publish it in the United States. It is encouraging when a major publisher embraces the role of literary explorer, eager to awaken American tastes to unfamiliar work.

[5] SHIPWRECKS, by *Akira Yoshimura.* Trans. by *Mark Ealey.* Harcourt Brace. $21.00.

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William Trevor is a writer's writer, a sustaining force in contemporary fiction. His latest volume of short stories[6] only adds to his reputation. He examines human behavior with such a keen eye and fine hand, that one thinks of a Henry James gifted with a modern brevity. In penetrating the layers and cavities of his people, one thinks of those medical programs on the cable channels that show actual operations in progress. You are amazed as you watch the surgeon cut, then open, then cut some more. This process of incision, retraction, suction, and then the knife again leads to the organ sought out, and this is what Trevor does in probing appearance, emotion, motivation, and quirk for the truth of a character.

In "A Friendship," Philip, a severe lawyer with two sons who tease his pomposity, is a paterfamilias of an older type. " . . . he was held in high regard, . . . he commanded both loyalty and respect. Meticulous, fair, precise as a blade, . . . he did not have a silly side . . . (and) when he ran out of his stock of conversational questions he tried no more, and displayed little interest in the small talk that was, increasingly desperately, levelled at him. He had a way of saying, flatly, 'I see' when a humorous anecdote, related purely for his entertainment, came to an end."

His wife Francesca has a friend, Margy, of whom Philip disapproves. The women drink gin, sprawl on the floor, and go for conversational lunches that would be unthinkable for the husband and wife. When Francesca has an affair out of boredom, it is with the encouragement of Margy, indeed almost with the intent of her being a spectator to it. When all is discovered and confessed, the friendship rather than the marriage takes the punishing blow. Philip demands that Francesca drop Margy, and Francesca considers it his right to exact this.

In "After Rain," the title story, an Englishwoman planning a holiday to Skyros changes her plans after a relationship breaks up. She goes instead to an Italian *pensione* her parents had taken her to as a child just before their divorce. Heat, quiet, and a different culture allow her a conversation with herself that would not have occurred with a companion, and she finds a key to understanding her problems with a discovery about a Renaissance painting.

The other stories are all well crafted and contain enough substance in even the first few lines to stir one's curiosity. In "The Piano Tuner's Wives," an Irish Protestant named Dromgould who is nearly blind married one woman rather than another, but years later when she dies, he marries the other woman who had remained single all that time. "A Bit of Business" explores the lives of two lower-class youths who get on by breaking into houses, while "The Potato Dealer" takes up a man who marries a girl pregnant with someone else's child for reasons best described as financially opportunistic.

Young writers perennially have war, lost love, and a wretched child-

[6] AFTER RAIN, by *William Trevor*. Viking. $22.95.

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hood as subjects, but after that is said and done the more commonplace vexations of life like pride, embarrassment, ignorance, vanity, and unkindness await their portrait painters. Somerset Maugham in his conclusion to *Ten Novels and Their Authors* quotes Chekhov approvingly on the subject of writing about the familiar. "People don't go to the North Pole and fall off icebergs. They go to the office, quarrel with their wives, and eat cabbage soup."

All the writers since alphabets were invented have complained of the difficulty, the frustration, and sometimes despair of their task, but any half dram of encouragement presses them back to the white paper or the blue screen. The seemingly impossible feat of making cabbage soup into art occurs more frequently than one might think possible.

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THOMAS M. DISCH

The Joy of Reasoning

IF I WERE THE KING OF MACEDONIA and able to select absolutely any tutor for the heir to my throne—someone who could be counted on to exert a steadying but not stultifying influence on a headstrong youth, someone at once wise and amusing, who can instruct by joke and anecdote, someone who can speak with poets as a poet, with astronomers as one of their guild, shrewd among merchants, tolerant of fools but a scourge to impostors—I would have no hesitation. Martin Gardner's the man for the job. Among contemporary "generalists"—writers knowledgeable and judicious across the entire spectrum of humane concerns—none wears the Aristotelian mantle of interdisciplinary, know-it-all wisdom so well as Gardner. The latest proof of his pre-eminence is this volume of collected essays, *The Night Is Large.*[1]

The essays here have been gleaned from almost fifty years of writing in a variety of magazines: *Scientific American,* where he presided as quizmaster for twenty-five years in his "Mathematical Games" column; *Skeptical Inquirer,* where he remains a ruthless but ever-good-humored debunker of pseudoscience; *The New York Review of Books,* where he has published many Epistles to the Literati interpreting physics and mathematics to those on the far side of the Two-Cultures divide. He has performed the same service in reverse, writing appreciations of those poets and novelists most likely to appeal to readers of a riddle-solving disposition—Lewis Carroll, Georges Perec, James Joyce, and others.

Most uncommonly for an intellectual of such broad sympathies and attainments, he writes lucid, plainspoken essays setting forth *his own* philosophical convictions. Gardner is a theist with a strong Platonic/Kantian bent, reverencing a god who is the universe's supreme mathematician. It is a philosophical position that offers little in the way of consolation except the possibility of the fleeting raptures of the Sublime. Whence, the title of this collection, *The Night Is Large,* which he interprets in this wise in the closing lines of his Introduction: "It is this sense of endless, unfathomable magic that envelops almost everything I have written, and which, I hope, is reflected in the essays I have selected here. We humans are incredibly tiny things in a universe that is huge and full of wonders."

In a Fannie Farmer candy sampler I always polish off the nut and coconut clusters before anything else, and it was the same with Gard-

[1] THE NIGHT IS LARGE: Collected Essays, 1938–1995. St. Martin's Press. $29.95.

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ner's book. No other debunker presents all forms of nuts and coconuts with so smooth and chocolatey a grace, and in Part III, subtitled "Pseudoscience," Gardner shows four erstwhile celebrities taking major intellectual bellywhoppers:

* Conan Doyle, in his post-Sherlock-Holmes dotage, maintaining that some amateurishly faked photographs proved the existence of fairies.

* Freud's endorsement of the charlatanry of his early sidekick, Wilhelm Fliess, who theorized that "all neuroses and sexual abnormalities are intimately related to the nose. He diagnosed ills by examining a nose's interior and thought he could cure these ills by cauterizing or applying cocaine to the nose's 'genital spots.'" Fliess and Freud together applied these theories to the nose of the unfortunate Emma Eckstein with results worthy of a Tom Stoppard farce.

* William James's utter gullibility in the matter of Mrs. Leonora Piper, the leading direct-voice medium of her time.

* Wilhelm Reich's descent into the nethermost lunacy of megalomania as his theory of Orgone Energy exfoliates into explanations of "the secret of gravity, the origin of matter, and the cause of the shape of the spiral nebulae." Once again, a crank idea leads to bloody farce: "The early experimental work reads like a comic opera. Reich purchased some radium, brought it into his orgone room, then before anyone knew what was happening, the OR (orgone energy), in combatting the NR (nuclear energy) ran amok. It unexpectedly turned into DOR ('deadly orgone energy') and the entire laboratory crew came down with 'ORANUR sickness.'" Here's Reich's own summing-up, in a 1952 bulletin titled "Emergency at Orgonon":

> The routine work at Orgonon has collapsed. Several workers had to abandon their jobs. Most buildings at Orgonon became uninhabitable. No work could be done in these buildings up to date. It is uncertain when circumstances will return to normal, if at all, and it is also uncertain what exactly has caused the emergency.

What a movie it might make! What a great new role for Jim Carey!

Gardner's piece on Reich is excerpted from *In the Name of Science*, which has remained steadily in print as *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science* since it first appeared in 1952. Alas, the book continues to be timely. Reichean orgone therapy may have fallen into desuetude, but most of Gardner's other targets are still alive and well and recruiting New Age believers from the ever-replenished pool of suckers born every minute. Indeed, one of his bêtes noires, homeopathic medicine, is flourishing as never before, on the evidence of local drugstores. The November 8, 1996 issue of the *Times Literary Supplement* suggested, in a review of a book championing homeopathy, that scientists are boorish and ill-mannered and owe homeopaths equal time on the podium. As though a century had not been long enough.

In his essay "Pseudoscience in the Nineteenth Century," after sum-

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marizing the rap sheets on homeopathy, phrenology, hydrotherapy, and other specious panaceas, Gardner considers

> . . . the question of whether Americans today are more or less gullible than their forebears. My own opinion is that the gullibility of the public today makes citizens of the nineteenth century look like hard-nosed skeptics. A larger fraction of Americans now go to college, science has made astounding strides, popular books and magazines about science abound, and big newspapers have first-class science editors. The result? Almost every newspaper runs a daily horoscope, and astrology books, like books about crank and sometimes harmful diets, far outsell books on reputable science. A Gallup survey in 1986 found that 52 percent of American teen-agers believe in astrology and 67 percent in angels.

He goes on to reprehend belief in Satan, crystal power, ESP, past-life regression, UFO abduction stories and those who publish them, acupuncture, and Shirley MacLaine's trance channeling.

The problem presented by such an enemies' list is not exclusively one of intellectual credence or credentials. There is also a social element, which Gardner rarely examines except, glancingly, in anecdote. How does one deal, civilly, with that large percent of the population who entertains foolish beliefs? "Entertain" may be the crux of that question, for many of those who tell pollsters they believe in astrology, angels, or the government's connivance in concealing UFO visitations (49% according to a *Newsweek* poll), are probably just showing American-style good manners. In America, we are urged to be respectful of other people's religions. Once this meant that the various denominations of Protestants (and even Catholics) ought not to be at each others' throats over doctrinal differences. In our latter-day era, with its so much larger menu of possible belief systems, many of Gardner's specific targets would claim exemption from criticism on the same grounds. Currently, Scientologists (whom Gardner skewered early in his career) are running full-page ads protesting the German government's treating them as a criminal conspiracy rather than as a religious faith being persecuted as once the Germans persecuted the Jews. The Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo was long exempt from police scrutiny and literally got away with murder because the cult availed itself of the religious high ground.

Even at the level of day-to-day conduct, crank ideas more often serve a social rather than a strictly intellectual purpose. Ronald Reagan would defer, as many husbands do, to the intuitions of Nancy's astrologers in inessential matters, in the interest of allowing Nancy some semblance of equal "authority." Even in the matter of homeopathy, orgone boxes, and other specious forms of medicine, why not let the fools, the despairing, and the indigent have a shot at the placebo effect? (One answer to this has begun to appear in recent news stories that relate how purveyors of "alternate medicine" now want their slice of the Medicare pie.)

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As to angels, I was brought up all through my Catholic childhood to believe I had one of my own. Did the adults who encouraged that belief actually share it, or was it another kindly bamboozlement, like Santa and the Tooth Fairy? The answer would depend, I think, on who asked the question and in what spirit. To a priest a good Catholic would avouch a pious faith in guardian angels; but *in vino veritas*? A wink and a sly smile might suggest otherwise.

Part III concludes with Gardner's review of the movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, a chore that catches the author at a rare moment of losing his cool. Gardner allows as how the music, photography, and acting are excellent, but that they mask "how bad the film really is," the fact that "beneath the visual hanky-panky stretches a thin, hackneyed plot that was done to death in the SF magazines and third-rate films of the fifties." This simply isn't so. What Spielberg did in *Close Encounters* that was unprecedented was to strip away the pulp sci-fi encrustations from the cultural icon of the flying saucer—the bug-eyed monsters, ray-guns, etc.—and exhibit UFO fantasies in their true identity, as expressions of longing for religious transcendence. The movie, in fact, dramatizes the title of Gardner's own book, *The Night Is Large*.

That people are always ready to believe the stories they most enjoy imagining is a fact of human nature time out of mind, and artists have readily colluded with them in this. If people cannot distinguish between the fictive devils of Milton or Goethe or Ira Levin (author of *Rosemary's Baby*) and redneck delusions of Ritual Satanic Abuse, are the artists to blame? Why not, instead, a policy of *Caveat qui credit*? (Let the believer beware).

But that is my sole quibble, for on the whole I find myself agreeing with Gardner about most things. Indeed, one of the liveliest pleasures of *The Night Is Large* is the opportunity of having one's own half-formulated convictions articulated by a masterful polemicist. One may have a heartfelt conviction that the supply-side theorists of the Reagan era were talking through their hats, but how gratifying it is to see Gardner hoisting Milton Friedman by his own petard for twenty pages of close reasoning and then to conclude the performance, as Cyrano ends his duels, with a joke.

> [A] group of people . . . survived a shipwreck and found themselves on a deserted island. Lots of canned goods had washed ashore, but without a can opener how could they get to the food? No one had a pocket knife, and the island was devoid of rocks that could be used for smashing. One of the survivors was an economist of the Chicago School. After hours of frustration and debate he suddenly announced that he had solved the problem. "Let's *assume*," he said, "that we have a can opener."

This is not to suggest that Gardner is a knee-jerk skeptic, intolerant of all theory. On the contrary, he is a connoisseur of theories, and is never

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happier than when he is contemplating the behavior of superstrings twanging and vibrating in ten or more dimensions. You will not come away from Gardner's exposition of superstrings any wiser about the ultimate nature of the subatomic realm. Gardner confesses that beyond a certain point *he* cannot follow the opacities of superstring theory, and I confess that even with his best efforts I am confounded and suspicious. These "inconceivably tiny one-dimensional line segments" that are "as much smaller than an atom as the atom is smaller than the solar system" seem to me the contemporary equivalent of angels dancing on the head of a pin. Admittedly, I stand in much the same relation to quantum mechanics, and that is now an established orthodoxy with tangible high-tech spin-offs. How does Gardner manage to make such arcane matters so interesting?

By dealing, always, with the human element that is the source of all theories, wisdoms, and follies. For instance, at the end of his chapter on superstrings, he introduces us to Sheldon Glashow, the cantankerous Harvard physicist who has been the most outspoken critic of superstring theory, who attacks his enemies with puns and doggerel. Gardner employs the same strategy whether he deals with poets, physicists, philosophers, or frauds. He takes Coleridge's poetic genius for granted with respect to *The Ancient Mariner* and writes a worldly-wise essay on how the man messed up his life and thereby self-destructed as a poet.

Gardner feels at home with genius of all sorts, and this is the chief desideratum in selecting a tutor for the heir to any throne. For kings must choose their economic advisors not on the basis of economic theory (for any capable professional will be able to skate circles around them) but by a shrewd estimate of their table manners.

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WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

At the Goreyworks

I WAS INTRODUCED TO THE WORK OF EDWARD GOREY in the fall of 1954 when a Cambridge friend of mine who knew Gorey, already a legend in Boston literary circles (he had by then moved to New York City), urged me to pick up copies of his first two books. Accordingly I purchased *The Unstrung Harp* (1953) and *The Listing Attic* (1954) at a bookstore in Harvard Square, each of the volumes priced at two dollars and providing me with delighted entry into the world of a unique talent. *The Unstrung Harp*, subtitled "Mr. Earbrass Writes a Novel," had a jacket design featuring a figure in evening dress, overpowered so it seemed by a very large harp visibly without strings. He is doubtless the protagonist of Mr. Earbrass' novel, indeed he looks very much like Mr. Earbrass—as do all the other figures in Gorey's book. That is, he wears, always, an expressionless expression; he is bald, with a mustache, a lidless eye, and a nose that is more or less parallel to his chin. We always see this figure in profile.

The Unstrung Harp consists of thirty panels with a hefty bit of text for each, more words than Gorey would ever again provide for his illustrations. In the first one the well-known novelist, author of the Hipdeep Trilogy, is seen on the croquet lawn of his home, Hobbies Old, situated near Collapsed Pudding in Mortshire: "He is studying a game left unfinished at the end of summer," the remains of which consist of two lonely wickets and a ball more or less encased in snow. In the distance is some statuary and a bit of unadorned, bleak nature. Mr. Earbrass is clad in one of his fur coats; his extremely elongated feet and footwear (spats?) look ineffective against the snow. A croquet mallet droops from his left hand as he stares off into some unpictured distance.

In her fine account of Gorey, the centerpiece of this handsome book about the artist,[1] Karen Wilkin speaks of the "charm" of his writing. *The Unstrung Harp* gave me plenty of that charm, as Mr. Earbrass' "verbs seem to have withered away and his adjectives to be proliferating beyond control." In the penultimate panel we see him, his novel finally published and reviewed, standing on his terrace at twilight: "It is bleak; it is gold; and the virtue has gone out of everything." Various words drift through his mind, a few of which are as follows: "ANGUISH TURNIPS CONJUNCTIONS ILLNESS DEFEAT STRING PARTIES NO PARTIES

[1] THE WORLD OF EDWARD GOREY, by *Clifford Ross* and *Karen Wilkin*. Harry N. Abrams, Inc. $29.95.

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URNS DESUETUDE DISAFFECTION." The juxtaposing of ANGUISH with TURNIPS; the sudden appearance of the unmemorable STRING in the midst of ILLNESS DEFEAT PARTIES and NO PARTIES; the lovely DESUETUDE, *not even in my vocabulary at that point*—all this was extremely appealing and quite unlike anything taking place in graduate classrooms at Harvard.

Anyway I didn't have to write a paper on Gorey and could content myself rather with memorizing some of the amazing limericks from *The Listing Attic*:

> To his clubfooted child said Lord Stipple,
> As he poured his post-prandial tipple,
> "Your mother's behavior
> Gave pain to Our Saviour,
> And that's why he made you a cripple."

In the accompanying drawing a merciless adult, in the act of filling his glass from a large decanter, peers down at a bandy-legged little fellow in shorts and tie, a crutch supporting his right arm. *The Listing Attic* was filled with that sort of unhealthy humor: a curate beating a small child to death with his cane; a woman whose stammer "was atrocious and so was her grammar; / But they were not improved / When her husband was moved / To knock out her teeth with a hammer." There was also the gentleman who detested leeks so much he clouted the maid who offered him one; or there was the about-to-be-immolated victim of "Some Harvard men, stalwart and hairy" who, in their drunken masculinity, cavorted about Harvard Yard at 3:00 A.M. shrieking "Come on out, we are burning a fairy." All this, though of dubious moral value, felt inspiriting as one looked at the miniature design and perfect five lines below. Compared to Gorey, Edward Lear, inventor of the limerick (whom Karen Wilkin names as an obvious "influence" on the artist) seemed of another age and rather too tame.

With reference to *The Unstrung Harp*, Wilkin identifies the main constituents of Gorey's art:

> Painstaking drawings with an eloquent orchestration of hatchings and tickings, marvelous period details of costume and setting, a narrative that leapfrogs from the precise to the unexplained, a tone of vague melancholy, and an author who manifestly delights in both visual and linguistic oddities.

I'm sure the vague melancholy had much to do with what appealed to me, and still does, in these productions. In *The Willowdale Handcar* (1962), for example, the feckless tourists visit "the ruins of the Crampton vinegar works, which had been destroyed by a mysterious explosion the preceding fall." *Où sont les neiges d'antan?* It isn't clear just what the visitors take away from their visit to the ruins—it's not even clear from

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the drawing that they're looking at them—but there's something vulnerable and affecting about the whole enterprise.

Gorey's melancholy is there in his books all right, but for me was most strikingly expressed in the sixty or so covers he did for Anchor paperbacks during his term at Doubleday. *The World of Edward Gorey* contains two of these: one for Gogol's tales, consisting of furred Russians up to no good; one for Gide's *Lafcadio's Adventures.* But the covers I love most are five in number: there is Melville's *Redburn* in which the red-shirted muscular hero, with strongly emphasized crotch, looks over his shoulder at three sailors eyeing him; there is James's *What Maisie Knew* in which the little girl (who would reappear as Charlotte Sophia in Gorey's *The Hapless Child,* 1961), is observing a very tall, black-suited male (probably Beale Farrange) importuning or threatening a female (Mrs. Beale?) against a background of grey wallpaper and gold drapery. There is Conrad's *The Secret Agent,* in which a Verlocian figure with a briefcase contemplates, all by himself, Greenwich observatory; or Kafka's *Amerika,* in which two passengers aboard a ship approaching New York stare at the towers of lower Manhattan. The sky is streaked with flashes of sunset-red fire; one of the watchers looks through binoculars, the other—probably our hero, Karl Rossmann—has one hand on the rail, another holding a folded-up umbrella. A black suitcase stands some feet away from him on the strongly-hatched grey deck. Perhaps best of all is Gorey's cover for Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time,* a Caucasian mountain wildness humanized scarcely at all by two tiny figures, one on horseback, the other standing at the edge of a precipice and (perhaps) declaiming Pushkin or Byron to the depths. All these designs have amazing force and appeal, hardly suggested by my crude descriptions. Of course they have also the flavor of a distant time, four decades ago, when "quality" books, handsomely designed, were first made available in paperback for the price of seventy-five or nintey-five cents. But they represent some of Gorey's most intense, secretive and disturbing portraiture, especially appropriate for books like *What Maisie Knew, The Secret Agent* and *Amerika* that display ambiguous events and furtive characters. Gorey would not be the right illustrator for Jane Austen; he could have done Emily Dickinson up proper.

Gorey left New York in 1986, his regular attendance at Balanchine's New York City Ballet now at an end.[2] In an interview conducted by Clifford Ross at Gorey's house on Cape Cod, the artist is at his most insouciant, reminding me at times of Auden's rebuke to a Philip Larkin comment—"Naughty, naughty." We are told that Manet "ruined" painting and that Picasso is detestable. On the other hand Gorey loves surrealism, collects postcards of dead babies and "ravishingly beautiful

[2] Wilkin suggests there may be a connection between Gorey's art and Balanchine's ballets, of which Gorey saw so many so often. The "taut economies of Gorey's compositions, the expressive gestures of his figures, and his way of arranging them within the confines of the definite rectangles of his drawings" have their analogue in Balanchine's art.

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crime scenes." His house is filled with little animals, finials, "an occasional driftwood," and "lots of iron utensils." He adores Flaubert, reads him "over and over again, albeit with a good deal of boredom." His relation to fiction is strictly an occasional one: "I haven't read a novel for a long time. Actually I did read one. I didn't like it." He swoons over the painter Francis Bacon but notes that "no matter how horrifying anything is, or how interesting, sooner or later it's just so much wallpaper on the wall." He should know: we are reminded of all that splendid wallpaper in his own drawings of interiors. At the end of the interview he speaks up for the kind of art that "is just sort of lukewarm." "Blessed are the nonchalant," he declares, then adds, "Well, the kinds of things I'm attracted to are nonchalant."

All very much the pronouncements of a coterie artist, not about to lay his head on the line or his heart on his sleeve. I imagine him as the sort of person you couldn't talk to without saying something gauche or self-betraying, and I don't plan to have a conversation with him. Karen Wilkin is astute in naming some of his ancestors: Lear and Lewis Carroll of course, along with Beardsley, Max Ernst and Paul Klee. But also Buster Keaton, the "Lucia" books of E.F. Benson and—in an excellent thought on Wilkin's part—the novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett, coterie-writer par excellence. I am grateful for Wilkin's directing my attention to many Gorey products I didn't know about, especially his sets and costume designs for a performance of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Mikado*. She describes the designs (three of them reproduced here) astutely:

> His vision of the town and population of Titipu is a delicately balanced gallimaufry of, among other things, traditional Japanese prints, turn-of-the-century postcards of English "watering places," the posters of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and a famous photograph of Lautrec himself in Japanese costume.

"An amalgam of British good taste and Kurasawa," she calls Gorey's costumes for the work, and she concludes her essay with a sympathetic and definitive summary of the virtues of this extraordinary artist by noting, with regard to Mr. Earbrass the novelist, that "There is no equivalent Gorey-artist figure." Nevertheless, for this "connoisseur of the arcane and the obsolete,"

> Pictures are probably more crucial than words to our sense of what Gorey is about. Important as his love of language, his carefully shaped sentences, and his tight rhymes may be to the character of his entrancing books, it is Gorey's imagery that etches itself in the memory, like an album of fading photographs from a vanished era, a series of isolated moments from a world at once unsettling, even baffling, but at the same time immensely appealing and wholly convincing.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

THOMAS M. DISCH's *The Castle of Indolence* was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award in the category of Criticism. The title essay first appeared in *The Hudson Review*. . . . DANIEL MENDELSOHN*, a New York-based writer and critic, is currently working on a new translation of the complete works of Cavafy for Farrar, Straus & Giroux. . . . SUSAN BALÉE's memoir of growing up in North Florida, "Settlers and Savages," appears in the Spring 1997 issue of *Grand Tour*. . . . DAVID MASON is spending the spring semester in Greece as a Fulbright Writer-in-Residence. He is co-editor with Mark Jarman of *Rebel Angels: 25 Poets of the New Formalism*. . . . CAROL IANNONE* teaches English in NYU's Gallatin School of Individualized Study and has published in *Commentary*, *The New Criterion*, and *Modern Age*. . . . ROBERT BLY's new book, *Morning Poems*, will be published by HarperCollins in April. . . . PATTIANN ROGERS' seventh book, *Eating Bread and Honey*, will be published by Milkweed Editions this fall. . . . *Learning to Talk* is ROBIN S. CHAPMAN's most recent book of poetry.

COLETTE INEZ, author of seven books of poetry, is currently on the faculty of Columbia University's Writing Program at General Studies. . . . Story Line Press will issue FLOYD SKLOOT's third novel, *The Open Door*, in the fall. . . . BRIAN COX's *Collected Poems* was published by Carcanet, England, in 1993. He has just edited *African Writers* (containing essays by Robert McDowell and Sonya Rudikoff) for Scribner's. . . . JOHN DREXEL was a 1996 Hawthornden Fellow and 1993-94 Amy Lowell Poetry Travelling Scholar. . . . RUTH FAINLIGHT's eleventh collection of poems, *Sugar-Paper Blue*, will be published by Bloodaxe Books this autumn. . . . JOHN LOUGHERY's biography of the painter John Sloan, published by Henry Holt & Co., was a finalist for the 1996 Pulitzer Prize in Biography. . . . JOSIAH FISK is a music critic and financial writer who specializes in simplifying mutual fund prospectuses. . . . ROBERT McDOWELL's revision of *Sound and Form in Modern Poetry* is available from the University of Michigan Press. "The Pact," a poem originally appearing in this magazine, is available in a limited edition from Aralia Press of West Chester, Pennsylvania. . . . ROBERT PHILLIPS is author of five books of poetry, three books of fiction, and several books of criticism. He is Professor of English at the University of Houston. . . . HAROLD FROMM's next contribution to *The Hudson Review* will be a review of Bert O. States's *Seeing in the Dark: Reflections on Dreams and Dreaming*. . . . THOMAS FILBIN's reviews have appeared in *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Boston Globe*, and *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. . . . WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD's review of *Moral Desperado: A Life of Thomas Carlyle*, by Simon Heffer, will be published in our Summer issue.

**Asterisk indicates a new contributor.*

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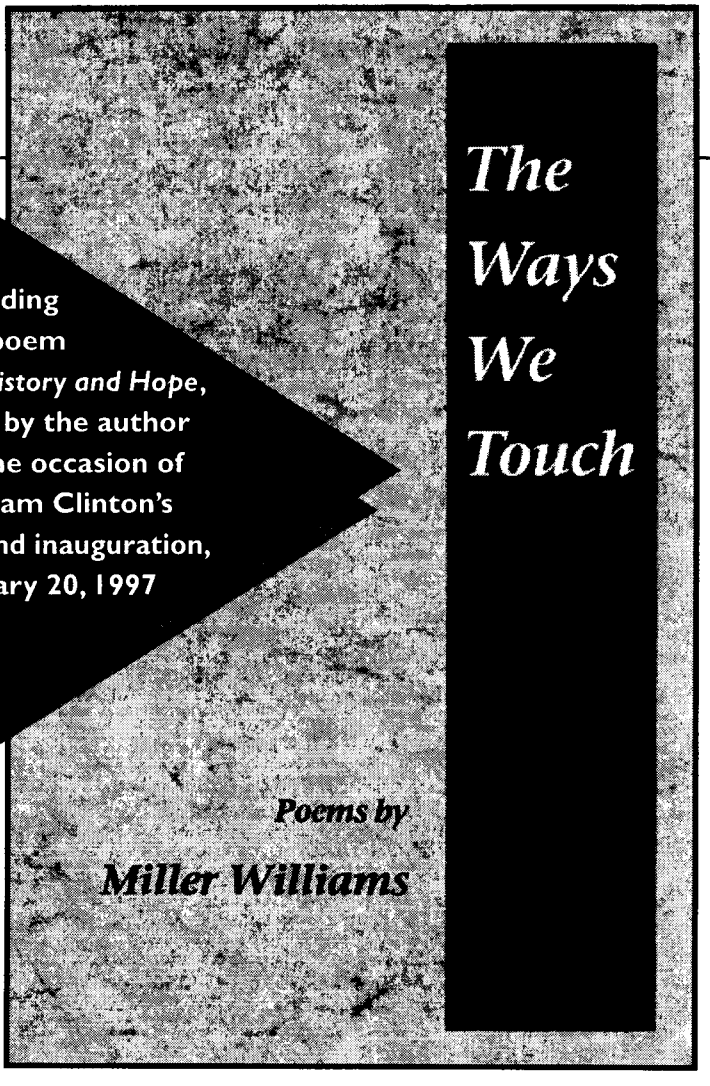
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IN THIS ISSUE:

The South has been measured—and found wanting—by people who stand outside of it geographically, historically, and spiritually. Politically correct historians and literary critics have reduced the South to a simplistic clash between white oppressors and black victims. No one in recent decades has wanted to explore further the ambiguities and complexities of the *real* South; instead, it has been far easier to demonize and dismiss a reductive South created by twentieth-century critics.

—Susan Balée, "Southern Classics," p. 45.

However we define poetry, it lives, as it has always lived, at a crossroads between tradition and modernity, between notions of eternal truth and change. And however skeptical they may be about themselves, their art or their language, poets are usually in this business for the long haul. A poet may be afraid to believe in eternity, yet write as if the ages mattered, as if poetry were intended to cross time and whisper its intimacies to the ears of strangers. There are many good reasons for thinking that notions of permanence are mad, but great art demands them nonetheless.

—David Mason, "Irish Poetry at the Crossroads," p. 67.

It's hard to think of any composer who has been discovered—who has needed to be discovered—as many times as Charles Ives. We have been trying to get a fix on him for seventy-five years. We have studied, recorded, edited and published him. We have brought his music to the masses . . . He is about to be on a postage stamp. In short, by most measures we have discovered Ives quite thoroughly. How well we have understood him is another matter.

—Josiah Fisk, "Discovering Ives, Once Again," p. 129.

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